

SPECIAL
DOUBLE ISSUE!

On·Spec

FALL 2000

\$9.95

SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNERS

Kain MASSIN
Siobhan CARROLL
R.W.C. SYLVESTER

Shawn BRAYMAN
Leslie BROWN
Lisa CARREIRO
Robyn HERRINGTON
Edward HOORNAERT
James KEENAN
Wilma KENNY
Steve MOHN
Carl SIEBER
Hayden TRENHOLM
Elizabeth WESTBROOK

NEW FICTION

Laurie CHANNER
& Peter WATTS
Cory DOCTOROW
Derryl MURPHY
Catherine MacLEOD

NONFICTION

Steve MOHN

COVER

Peter MacDOUGALL

DISPLAY UNTIL FEB. 15, 2001

15005



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<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society	
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On Spec is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$18.00 for individuals and \$25.00 for institutions. (Price includes GST. GST # 123625295.) For US and overseas rates, see p. 7. Send SASE (Canadian postage) for advertising rate card, contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details.

Send all mail (letters, story/poetry submissions, subscription requests or queries, art samples, etc.) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph: (780) 413-0215. Fax: (780) 413-1538. All submissions MUST include self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with Canadian postage, or self-addressed envelope (SAE) and International Reply Coupons to cover return postage. Manuscripts without SASE will not be returned. We do not read faxed or e-mailed submissions, or work that has been previously published in print or on the web. Enclose cover letter including name, address, story/poem title, phone number, and word count (6,000 words max. for fiction; 100 lines max. for poetry). Please indicate if manuscript is disposable; include SASE for reply. We reply by mail only. Nonfiction and artwork are commissioned only. Send samples of artwork (copies) Attn: Art Director Jane Starr. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without the author's or artist's consent.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Department of Canadian Heritage; Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

On Spec is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA) and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association, and is distributed by CMPA, AMPA, and BBR (U.K.).

Typesetting and layout in PageMaker on a Macintosh PowerPC by Jena Snyder.
Body typeface is Baskerville. Headline typeface is Template Gothic.
Printed in Canada by Alpine Press Limited.

Publications Mail Registration Number 08148
Postage Paid at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
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ISSN 0843-476X
Website: www.icomm.ca/onspec
E-mail: onspec@earthling.net

On·SPEC

Fall 2000

Featuring the winners of the On Spec Short Story Contest

FIRST PRIZE, On Spec Short Story Contest:

Wrong Dreaming	<i>Kain Massin</i>	8
illustrated by James Beveridge		

SECOND PRIZE, On Spec Short Story Contest:

A Killer of Men	<i>Siobhan Carroll</i>	22
illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk		

THIRD PRIZE, On Spec Short Story Contest:

Getting Pissed With the Minotaur	<i>R.W.C. Sylvester</i>	30
illustrated by Ronn Sutton		

HONORABLE MENTIONS On Spec Short Story Contest:

Jack Be Nimble	<i>Carl Sieber</i>	42
Diva	<i>Lisa Carreiro</i>	55
The Wedding	<i>Wilma Kenny</i>	65
Io You	<i>Shawn Brayman</i>	70
Cowboy Bill	<i>James Keenan</i>	82
Prize	<i>Elizabeth Westbrook</i>	93
Devil, Devil	<i>Edward Hoornaert</i>	101
Preserving the Species	<i>Leslie Brown</i>	116
Tempus Fugitive	<i>Hayden Trenholm</i>	128
Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter	<i>Steve Mohn</i>	141
Just a Passenger	<i>Robyn Herrington</i>	153

NEW FICTION

Postcard Fiction: "Alphabetia"	<i>Catherine MacLeod</i>	170
Bulk Food	<i>Laurie Channer & Peter Watts</i>	172
illustrated by Peter MacDougall		
The Fundamental Unit of Memory	<i>Cory Doctorow</i>	194
illustrated by Lar DeSouza		
Last Call	<i>Derryl Murphy</i>	214
illustrated by Robert Pasternak		

NONFICTION

"Junk Mail"	<i>Jena Snyder</i>	5
On SF & Film: Seeing 2001	<i>Steve Mohn</i>	164

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The donors listed below have all given generously in the past year. We are grateful for their support.

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Roger Moore

BEHIND THE SCENES SUPPORT:

The continued success of On Spec is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as:

Jane Bisbee, Judy Hayman, and Vern Thiessen of Alberta Community Development and Alberta Foundation for the Arts; Colin Bamsey and Tobey Morris of Clear Lake Ltd.; Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library; Tanya Huff; David Macpherson of Advance Graphic Art Services Ltd.; Donna McMahon; Robert Runté; Bill Williams of Alpine Press Ltd.; Edward Willett; Michelle Wilson.

Financial support provided by the **Alberta Foundation for the Arts**, a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries.



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FOR THE ARTS
SINCE 1957

On this issue...

The On Spec Short Story Contest

Jena Snyder, General Editor

THIS ISSUE OF *ON SPEC* IS SPECIAL IN MANY ways. First—and most obviously—is the size. We decided a contest should offer a prize for our readers as well as the writers, and a thank-you to our new subscribers. Inside, you'll find the stories that our contest judge, TANYA HUFF thought were the cream of the crop.

KAIN MASSIN of Austrailia took First Prize for his story "Wrong Dreaming." KAIN has twice finished in the top ten places of the Science Fiction Writers of Earth Contest, received an Honorable Mention from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest and been short-listed for the Aurealis Awards for Australian SF & F. He has had stories published in *Harbinger Magazine* and in *Altair* magazine. In his other life, he is a high school teacher living in Adelaide, South Australia, with his (understanding and patient) wife and teenage daughter. Kain says "Wrong Dreaming" is his first professional sale.

Second Prize went to SIOBHAN CARROLL for her story, "A Killer of Men." Siobhan is a new writer, currently attending her third year at

the University of British Columbia. She has done some poetry readings at the Word on the Street festival and has some poems forthcoming in *Room of One's Own*. This is her first professional sale.

R.W.C. SYLVESTER is our Third Prize winner, for "Getting Pissed With the Minotaur." A teacher residing in Vancouver, he says he is, "like the rest of you, is at work on my first novel." He also adds that he "doesn't normally do this kind of thing."

As well as the three prize-winning stories, we have as well eleven Honorable Mentions, each of them unique and exciting, and representing the many sub-genres of SF. We also have three bonus stories for you by some rising stars in Canadian SF: CORY DOCTOROW, LAURIE CHANNER & PETER WATTS (working in collaboration), and DERRYL MURPHY. Scattered throughout this issue, starting on page 170, you'll find some deliciously creepy "postcard" stories (under 150 words in length) by CATHERINE MACLEOD. These postcards, from a collection entitled "Alphabetia," lend a whole new meaning to the phrase "Don't go there." Look for more postcards from "Alphabetia" in future issues.

We've also expanded our horizons, and are very pleased to offer "Seeing 2001," the first of a series of essays on film and SF by STEVE MOHN. A fiction writer as well, Steve had a story in our Future Crime issue ("Sonny Boy" Spring 2000), and won an Honorable Mention in our contest for "Not Plowed Or Sanded In Winter."

Settle into your most comfortable reading spot—I have a feeling you're going to start this special issue, and not want to put it down! 🍁

About our cover artist

PETER MACDOUGALL (art for Cover and "Bulk Food") works in pen and ink, water color, acrylic, digital and digital 3D media doing design and illustration. In addition, he writes speculative fiction, tinkers with computers, and even earns a living. He reports that he is native to the Canadian coast, either east or west. To see more of his artwork, visit <http://home.istar.ca/~pem/>

Letters to the Editors

“Junk Mail”

Jena Snyder, General Editor

Q: Why do magazines send out that cheesy “Subscribe Now!!” junk mail?

A: I’ll bet a lot of you open your mail just like I do – standing beside the recycle box or garbage can so you can chuck the unsolicited mail without giving it a second glance.

And I’ll bet a lot of you—again, like me—think that the cheesy, neon-bright, fake highlighted and “personalized” junk mail is the most offensive of all. You might be surprised to find that in advertising, *loud*, *ugly*, *cheesy* and *gimmicky* usually result in sales. It’s a perfect example of the squeaky wheel getting the grease—if it’s tacky, people remember it. And buy it.

Subscriptions are the life blood of a magazine. We **MUST** continually seek out new subscribers, and continually nag existing subscribers to renew. And obviously, if we’re smart, we’ll send out neon-bright, cheesy “Best Buy!!” subscription campaigns to bring in the largest number of subscriptions. We know a good number of people receiving our subscription campaign packages will dump them without even opening them up, but we’re hoping many more will take a look at what we’re offering.

Q: Okay, but why do you sell your mailing list?

A: We don’t sell our mailing list, but we do occasionally trade current subscription lists with a few select literary and SF magazines, only for subscription campaigns. We think we have a great product

to offer, and that the magazines we trade with do as well.

(We recently bought—we thought—the current SFWA membership list for a mailout including a free back issue and an invitation to submit work. So why do 75% of the responses we've received start with, "I'm not a SFWA member, but I'd like to subscribe..."?)

In a list trade or purchase, the lists are to be used one time only. If you've heard from us more than once, keep in mind that if you've ever subscribed to a magazine, joined a club, filled out an entry form, been to a convention, sent in a story or poem, requested guidelines, entered a contest, requested a newsletter from a bookstore, your name and address are guaranteed to be on a list somewhere that is available for purchase, and that many lists overlap.

Here's a financial nugget to chew on, too: anything over a 2% return on a subscription campaign is considered good, and 3% would be fantastic. If we send out 15,000 subscription packages, we'd be very lucky to bring in 450 new subscribers. Realistically, a 15,000-piece mailout might bring in about 200 new subscribers.

But as expensive and sometimes ineffective and often frustrating as subscription campaigns are to everyone—us included!—they are also the best way for a magazine to bring in new subscribers and reach potential readers.

Q: Wouldn't it be easier to just put more magazines in book stores and on newsstands?

A: *On Spec* costs \$5.95 at the newsstand, but if you think we see even close to that amount, you're dreaming. Sometimes when I look at the newsstand sales figures, I think they should be listed under "advertising expense" rather than "sales revenue"!

We have a few independent stores that buy copies from us directly—at a discount—but we are mainly distributed by the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA), based in Toronto. In Alberta, we are also featured on the new AMPA literary magazine racks in **Greenwoods' Bookshoppe** in Edmonton, **Pages** in Calgary, and **La Palette** in Banff.

On Spec could not exist without this kind of distribution. We simply do not have the resources or the staff to make sure that *On Spec* is available in stores across Canada without a distributor, and we don't have a large enough subscriber base to finance operations without national distribution. Both CMPA and AMPA, besides providing distribution, also offer other services from free consultation

services to website representation to newsletters full of information on how to best promote the magazine.

The down side of distributors is that they take a sizable discount, they do not pay us for an issue until long, long, long after the next issue has been shipped, and they destroy any unsold copies—copies we have to pay our printer for within 30 days of delivery. We have to trust the distributors will choose stores where *On Spec* will sell well, and to let us know how many copies they think they can sell. We have a 60% sell-through rate with CMPA, which is considered excellent in the magazine business. But this still means that 40% of the copies we send to CMPA to be placed in stores are eventually destroyed.

So how can we make sure that *On Spec* is getting into readers' hands rather than being recycled or (God forbid) being chucked into a landfill somewhere?

You guessed it: subscription campaigns with bright colors, eye-catching graphics, and cheesy "Best Buy!!" offers. ♣

There's never been a better time to subscribe to On Spec!

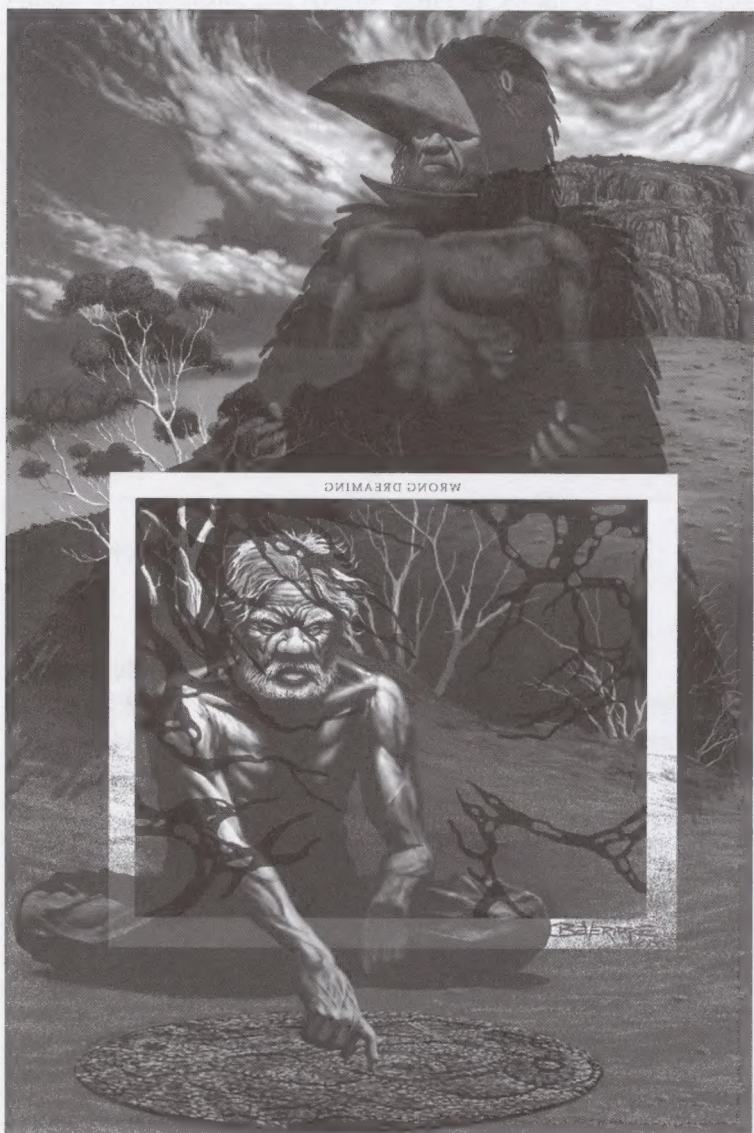
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You can also phone or fax your VISA information to us at our new fax number: (780) 413-1538.

Please indicate whether you want your subscription to start with the current issue or the next issue (i.e. Fall 2000 or Winter 2000).



First Prize
On Spec Short Story Contest

Wrong Dreaming

Kain Massin

illustrated by James Beveridge

RAINBOW RIVER, BLACK RIVER;

Young girl, little spirit;

Fire sun, salmon moon;

Little spirit, black river;

Crow man, come soon.

The old man's body ached with the effort of leaning over and drawing in the fine silt. He stopped the chant, sat back and waited for the pain to ease. A breeze sprang up and danced along the gorge, bouncing off the steep cliffs and tickling the leaves of the gum trees that clung to the rocks. The old man smiled in gratitude as tongues of air licked the perspiration off his face and back.

After some time the strain lessened, and he looked back down at the picture. He stayed that way, his resolve waning, but his eyes strayed to the stick figure he had included, the figure of the little girl, and his jaws clenched. His anger smoldered, again, and he leaned forward, carefully bringing the point of his sharp stick down on the surface. He drew a line to cut off the river, to mark its boundary.

Rainbow river, black river.

Perspiration again ran through his beard, but he ignored it; the picture would send another breeze soon. His brows furrowed in concentration, and he was barely aware of the creep of shadows along the ground.

A soft sound caught his attention, its dissonance magnified by the silence in the gorge. Somewhere in the cliffs above him, a stone had been dislodged, and he heard its progress downward, a series of clatters punctuated by silence as it fell free. He would have scrambled to his feet, but his limbs were too stiff.

The stone clattered closer, and he felt it whisper past his head and land in the silt with a soft thud. He scanned the ancient rocks above him, but there was nothing else to disturb the quiet.

The stone was lying in the picture. It was thin and long as a finger and had landed on its side in the one space he had left free and he immediately saw that it would leave an indentation like a crow's beak.

Willing his hands to calmness, he reached over and plucked the stone up. Quickly, before he lost the fury that had driven him, he drew the rest of the crow's head around the indentation.

Muscles stretching and tendons groaning, he stood up and walked carefully around the picture. He saw that it was perfect, even better than he'd planned. He did not smile. Instead, he turned his back and walked up the gorge, deeper into the ancient and eroded mountains, past a bend and out of sight of the picture.

The sun was setting, its golden light shining full in his face, and he welcomed the warmth. Ahead, a kangaroo sipped from the stream, its ears up and turning in all directions. It heard his quiet step, and stood up, tall and alert. The two of them regarded each other.

The old man grew uneasy: there was something in the animal's gaze. He thought he read disapproval, but tried to ignore it.

Can't trust kangaroos; they don't know everything.

"You don't know everything," he said, but the kangaroo stood its ground, its gaze unrelenting and implacable.

The old man nodded. He turned and walked back down the gorge.

Someone else had been down there; there were the marks of shoes in the silt, but the picture was as he remembered and he didn't have the time to worry about intruders. He scooped some mud out of the stream and smeared it over his chest and down his arms. He was much more careful with the designs he drew on his face.

He clapped his hands at the cliff faces in acknowledgment. His feet moved in response, and he launched into a dance, his back straight as he slapped his feet down on the sand. His chant echoed off the walls to provide a beat. After some minutes, he stepped onto the picture, his feet ramming down like piledrivers.

The sun was gone, and his feet were bleeding, before the surface finally yielded under the stamping.

THE OLD MAN'S FACE WAS A MASK OF RIGID CONTROL, HIS LIPS pressed firmly together, his black fists balled, his eyes hard. Around him was a sea of grief, with people weeping openly. One old woman had collapsed onto the coffin, her mouth open in a wail. But the old man was detached from them.

The next photograph, however, showed his face contorted in an effort to keep back tears that had sneaked past his control. His eyes were shut, their defiance quelled, and his fingers were clutching at the shoulder of the woman on the coffin.

Campbell watched as Worrell casually dropped the photograph and looked at the next one, his face mirroring the disinterest evident in his posture. Worrell glanced at the next photo before flipping it onto the growing pile of discarded pictures.

"You might remember the story," Campbell continued. "A young Aboriginal girl came from the Flinders Ranges to do her Year 12 in Adelaide? She was abducted on the way from school? Murder-rape?"

"Oh yes," Worrell replied, with no effort to put any interest in his voice. Campbell hadn't really expected him to remember, or even to try. What happened in the world outside his immediate sphere was of no consequence to Worrell. His only interests lay in the field of art and artists; all else belonged in someone else's world.

"Her body was returned to her people," Campbell went on, "and it was picked up by them in Hawker. The paper sent me up there to get some pictures, try to inject some human interest."

"Oh yes," Worrell repeated, casually flipping over another photo. He paused.

Campbell smiled, knowing which picture had stopped Worrell. It was the old man again. The girl's uncle ... at least that was all the information he'd been able to get out of the locals. (Although, to be exact, the locals had described him as the uncle for everyone in the tribe.) In this picture, he had changed: his face was determined, as if he'd reached a decision that he'd wanted to avoid. There was an

aura of dignity that shone out of the photo. Campbell was proud of the shot.

"Yes, Quentin," Campbell said, "that face of his ... it got my attention. I decided to follow him, see what he did. I had the feeling there was another story here."

Worrell moved on to the next photo, then slipped back into his bored routine. This next batch consisted mostly of landscapes, shot while he'd driven his rented car after the old man. They'd left Hawker and headed into the Flinders Ranges, Campbell keeping well back. When the old man left his car, Campbell had followed on foot, along the trickling waterways, deeper into the ancient hills. Followed him to an isolated gorge, where the old man had sat down next to a stream and started drawing in the sand.

Campbell watched Worrell carefully, and saw him freeze at the photo. His eyes raced over the surface. "Wayne," he said, "what's this?"

Campbell felt a smile tug at his lips. "The old man drew it in the sand. He took about an hour to do it. Then, he got up and left."

Worrell actually turned to face him. "*He left?*"

Now, Campbell smiled freely. "Yes. Just left it there. As soon as he was out of sight, I scooted over and snapped it." He leaned forward and pointed at the markings. "Luckily, it was near sunset, so the shadows highlight every line."

"Yes." Worrell was only half listening, his eyes avidly caressing the photograph. "Just left it?" He shook his head. "It's a strange design. Never seen it before. He seems to have divided into two: the normal world and ... something else." He shook his head again, then he looked at Campbell. "He really just left it?"

Campbell's smile widened. "Just walked away."

"With nothing to protect it," Worrell finished. "No ring of stones, no warding sticks." He swallowed, a deliberate act. "No copyright."

Campbell, wondering how long it would take Worrell to think of this, smiled complacently.

MARK DEWLING HAD A DEAD GOAT DRAPED OVER HIS SHOULDER as he entered the wide gorge. He walked over to the four-wheel-drive he'd left parked in the shade of some gum trees.

"Uncle!" he called, heaving the goat's carcass up to the roof racks. Although summer had not yet set in, the shade was refreshingly cool. He pulled a rag out of the boot and rubbed away the worst of the

dried blood that had dripped onto his legs.

Then he stopped. There had been no answer from the old man.

Bags had been placed near the vehicle, and he looked inside. As he'd expected, they contained ochre powder, eight or ten different colors, which the old man used for painting. He raised his eyes to the slopes, quickly picking out the spots where the old man had scraped his powders from the rocks.

The old man was sitting near a deep mauve rock, his collecting bag discarded next to him, his gaze unfocused. Dewling climbed up quickly, heart racing with fear. The old man did not look around, but sat immobile like the rocks.

"Uncle," Dewling whispered as he knelt next to him. He reached out a tentative hand and dared to touch the old, dry skin. There was a coldness to the touch, and Dewling's heart skipped a beat, but the old eyes regained their focus and a sere smile was turned to him.

"Ah, little lizard, you've come back." The old man's voice was as dry as the land, crackling with the effort. The eyes drifted away, again. "I had a feeling—something I thought was all finished. Bloody near bugged my feet trying to stop it." The grey mane shook. "Help me to the car. You have to take me somewhere."

Dewling helped the old man to his feet. He seemed unsteady, as if he'd aged suddenly, not at all like the sprightly man Dewling knew him to be. They slid and crawled down the slope, and walked slowly to the car. He helped the old man into the front seat and strapped him in.

"Where are we going, Uncle?" he asked.

The eyes turned on him, shining with moisture. "I'll show you," whispered the reedy voice.

Dewling nodded, not daring to ask more. He drove out of the gorge and turned onto the dirt road, turning the vehicle towards Hawker. He was unsettled by the old man's apparent weakness. Although no one knew his true age, he had never been fragile. Dewling just thought of him as *being*, an immortal who never seemed to age.

"Turn here." The order was whispered, as if with effort. Dewling turned the wheel, although his heart gave a thump.

"No, Uncle," he pleaded, "please don't go there!"

The old man said nothing, his eyes lost in the distance, ignoring Dewling's outburst. The young man bit his lip and drove on. As they neared the parking area, he kept his eyes on the road, hoping that the old man wanted to go past.

“Stop here.”

Dewling pulled off the road and into the carpark. There were already two cars there, and he groaned at the thought of meeting white tourists.

“Bring my paints,” came the whispery voice.

The old man’s hand and arm felt light, as if he had withered during the short drive. His back was stooped, and he leaned on the young man when they walked along the pathway. Dewling picked him up and carried him when they walked over a dry creek bed; there was almost no weight.

A middle-aged couple met them coming the other way. As Dewling had expected, they dropped their voices and pretended to ignore the two Aboriginals, even though they stepped off the path to let them by.

“You leave my goat alone,” Dewling muttered as he walked by them, and was gratified to see their faces drop in shock.

He stopped on the bank of the dry river. Ahead, the bed was strewn with rocks, a bold testament to the river’s strength on the rare occasions when it ran. Now, there wasn’t even a trickle. The only water lay in the permanent pool that his gaze was trying to avoid.

“Take me there.” This time, he could hear a reluctance in the tone, but the determination was clear.

Dewling carried the old man down to the riverbed and over to the pool. Beyond it rose a rock, dark and silent. He put the old man down and stepped back, his heart pounding.

Death Rock.

“Tourist attraction,” the old man said, a soft derision in his voice. “This is a bloody sacred place. Bloody rock was pulled out of the ground, long time ago, and the water filled its hole. There’s always water here. The elders used to come here when it was their time to die.”

Dewling wanted to shout: *I know that!* However, he kept quiet and nodded in acknowledgment. The old man turned around until he was facing the water and the rock.

“I did a bad drawing,” he whispered, his voice so quiet that Dewling had to sit in front of him. “Back then, couple weeks ago, when they brought the body of the little sparrow, I got very angry.” He looked over at Dewling, his face soft, although his words were harsh. “How could they do that to my little sparrow? Those white bastards! I’d show them.” The eyes closed. Tightly. “I did a drawing. A bad drawing.”

A bad drawing? Dewling tried to understand, but it was beyond him. "I'll get it back for you."

The old head shook with some effort. "I destroyed it. But somebody stole it, first. Some poor bloody white fella doesn't understand."

THE PRINTING PROCESS HAD WORKED BEYOND THEIR EXPECTATIONS. The picture had been transferred to blank canvas, every dot and line and scrape standing out clearly. Campbell set it on an easel and stood back to admire it. He and Worrell had thought long and hard about their enterprise, deciding on the best course of marketing the picture. Eventually, Worrell had come up with the idea.

"You know, Wayne," he had said, still holding the photograph, "we could have this transferred to canvas and sell it as an uncolored painting. Let them paint it to their liking."

Campbell had snorted. "That's like selling a coloring-in book to children."

Worrell's face had taken on a look that indicated Campbell could well be an infidel. "No, Wayne. Aboriginal art is *very* mode. Something like this, that people can personalize ... well, let's just try it. What say we make up a small run, say about a hundred, and see how they sell?"

Campbell had shrugged; he was not an expert on art, or its market, but he was willing to go along with the suggestion.

"Needs color," he said to himself as he studied the canvas. He turned and walked over to the package that Worrell had sent to him. In it were tiny pots of paint: ochre in a range of colors, all collected from the Flinders ranges. Worrell had even made sure that the powders were fixed with egg-white, so that they were as authentic as possible.

Campbell opened some of the pots and selected a brush.

Where to start?

The river? He shrugged and stepped over to the picture.

What color?

Rainbow river.

The thought just came to him, as if whispered into his mind, but he absorbed the idea.

"All right," he addressed the picture, "which color?"

Blue.

Again the idea insinuated itself in his mind, and he chuckled quietly: this was going to be easy.

THE BLUE WATERS OF THE GULF SHIMMERED AND DANCED ON HIS right, but Dewling glanced over to his left. The Flinders Ranges rose up from the plain a bare ten kilometers away. He could never get over how old they were. They had endured so many millions of years of erosion that anything sharp had long been leveled by the hammering of weather. In fact, they looked like a blanket thrown over a sleeping form.

He looked back at the road. Adelaide was four hours in front of him, and the old man had pressed him to hurry.

"You got to go to Adelaide," he had said, his eyes rheumy. "There's a poor white bastard, there, and he don't know what he's doing."

"Adelaide's a big place," Dewling had pointed out, careful to not appear to be rejecting the task. "I won't know—"

"You'll know." The words, although whispered, had the tone and finality of a command. He could not argue.

"How'm I going to find him?" Dewling repeated, to himself, as his car droned down the road.

THE OLD MAN STARTED AWAKE, BLINKING RAPIDLY AS HE TRIED to take in his surroundings. The shadows had lengthened and there was a babble of voices. He looked around and winced: a group of schoolchildren was climbing over the river's banks, laughing and giggling, ignoring the instructions of their teachers. Then he was spotted, and the noise level dropped. He was aware of hurried whispers and quiet giggles, but chose to ignore them. Instead, he listened to the sounds of the rocks and the whispers of the grass.

Time passed, although he did not pay attention to it. He was marginally aware that the schoolchildren were gone, when a deep sound reached out to him. A silent sound, rising from the rock, but resonating in all the objects around him.

Slowly, he raised his eyes to the silhouette of the rock. It was aware of him, but regarded him with a studied indifference. It raised its voice, louder now, although still silent, and the surface of the water shivered.

So, his little lizard had not made it in time. He'd known it would be left to him, although he'd tried to avoid it.

He opened some of his paints, took off his shirt and began painting designs on his face and chest.

*Little magpie, little mischief;
Fast wings, cheeky beak;
Be brave, fly quick.*

By the time he was finished, the water in the pool was swirling, gripped in an eddy of forces that even he could not understand. With a final look around at his surroundings, he stepped into the icy air that now bordered the water.

DEWLING ONLY NOTICED THE BUILDING DARKNESS AFTER HE HAD entered Adelaide. Up until then, he'd been too concerned with the traffic along the Port Wakefield Road. However, when he pulled over to the side to flip through the street directory, he had to turn on the cabin light. It was only four in the afternoon, but it was as dark as night. A quick glance at the other cars showed that their headlights were all off, as were the streetlights. People walking seemed to have no trouble with the lighting: he could see shoppers moving through shops, children on bikes, old people walking. No one noticed.

Strange. Am I the only one who can see?

He lifted his eyes above the surrounding buildings and looked at the green hills that ring Adelaide. The air in his chest froze.

There, on the hill's face, he could see a wound in the hill, and, like blood pouring from a wound, a black cloud was spurting out of the hillside, covering the city and blocking the sun.

Against every instinct in his body, Dewling put his car into drive and moved off in that direction, the old man's words swirling eerily in his mind.

I did a bad drawing.

You'll know.

I did a bad drawing.

CAMPBELL BLINKED. HIS EYES WERE WATERY, AND HE COULD hardly see. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hand, but it didn't help. With a reluctance he couldn't understand, he laid his brush to one side and walked to the bathroom to splash water on his face. The water was cool and refreshed him; he hadn't realized how tired he'd become.

"Coffee," he muttered aloud.

A crow cawed. Close.

He looked out the window, and stepped forward. The outside was dark. No, not dark; it was black. From up here, in Belair, he should have been able to see the Adelaide Plains and the setting sun over the gulf. He couldn't even see the trees in his front yard. He ran his tongue over his lips, drawing in some water, moistening a mouth that had suddenly gone dry. He turned and walked toward the front door.

Black.

The thought rose in him as he passed the painting, and he stopped. All that remained was to finish the part that looked like a crow's head, only a few strokes with the brush. Just the beak and the head; a simple swirl, just the outline, with one color. The idea was seductive, to the point of being compelling, and he picked up the brush.

There was a noise, a distant sound, tantalizingly familiar, but just beyond his grasp. It added a rhythm to his action, a segue from inactivity to creation. He didn't even have to concentrate; he almost closed his eyes. His hand moved easily, and the crow's head was finished.

Now, he recognized the sound, as it flared around him, and swelled into being: it was a didgeridoo, played with anger. The crow's head in the picture turned and faced him. It wasn't a crow's head, but a headdress, and the Aboriginal face below it was painted white, the streaks of white ochre barely covering the black skin beneath. The eyes glared at him, bored into him, and the mouth opened.

The Figure cawed, a crow's voice filled with triumph and fury.

Campbell stepped back, his eyes opening wide. *This is not happening!!*

The painting went black. Every bit of its uncolored surface suddenly turned jet black. The rainbow colors faded, and the black captured all the animals and river, the sun and the moon, even the Figure. Campbell tried to turn and run, but the changing picture held him mesmerized.

The black spread. Like a growing shadow, it climbed over the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Campbell closed his eyes, trying to clear his head. When he opened them, he gasped.

His study was gone, and he was standing amongst tumbled boulders. The light of a campfire beyond the boulders threw a shimmering glow in his direction; he could hear the chirp of crickets and feel a cool breeze on his skin.

Something moved in the glow from the fire, the shadow of an approaching man.

His heart beating, he backed away.

“Bloody hell!” The voice came from behind Campbell. He whirled around to see a young Aborigine standing near him, his face openly shocked. “What’s this?” The Aborigine took a step forward. “I just stepped into your house, but—” He looked around, eyes wide, then faced Campbell. “You should sue the decorators.”

Campbell took a step backward, before realizing that it was towards the fire, towards the approaching Figure. He half-turned, looking wildly from the young Aborigine to the boulder that blocked his view of the fire.

The Figure stepped in view. The crow’s headdress was still in place, glassy eyes staring at him with malice. Feathers had been sewn onto a cape draped over its body; more feathers padded its feet. It held a long spear in its hands. The Figure stopped and looked at them, eyes sharp and quick.

“You’re in deep shit.” The young Aborigine breathed the words, fear making his voice shake. He looked down to avoid the piercing gaze, and swallowed. “I hope it’s you, anyway.”

The fear in the other’s voice bonded Campbell to him; he hoped that they had a common purpose. “What is it?” he asked from between teeth he had clenched together.

“Kadaicha,” the young man said. “A bad spirit. Come to kill someone.”

Campbell tried to turn, but his legs were frozen. The Kadaicha screamed again, then turned sideways, lifted the spear and took a slow, exaggerated step toward Campbell. And another, as slow and deliberate. In a macabre dance, the Kadaicha moved inexorably closer and the spear remained pointed at Campbell’s heart. He managed to back away a step, then another, before a boulder blocked his retreat. The Kadaicha screamed, and all hope disappeared. Campbell watched the tip of the spear touch the front of his shirt.

The Kadaicha stabbed once, and the point slid through Campbell’s chest. He felt the coldness of its passage, felt it slide out his back and into the rock behind him. He looked down at the shaft in shock.

There was no pain!

The spear was insubstantial. Campbell cried in relief, a sound dying on his lips when he saw the tight smile on the Kadaicha’s face. Very slowly, the spear began to solidify, and Campbell felt pain in his chest. He clutched at the spear.

“Help!” he screamed, trying to pull the shaft out.

A hand grabbed the Kadaicha from behind and dragged it back.

The spear slid free, and Campbell slipped to the ground, his lungs painfully grabbing air.

"Oh, shit," the young Aborigine muttered. "What have I done?" Taking a deep breath, he stepped between Campbell and the Kadaicha.

A wind started from nowhere, going nowhere, and a maelstrom of dust and rocks swirled around them. An old man, Campbell recognized him at once, stepped out of the air, and threw his hands up. He chattered wildly, like an angry bird, and faced the Kadaicha, who regarded him with annoyance, but did not back away.

Another shape stepped out of the air, a young girl with heavy sadness about her. She walked up to the Kadaicha and spoke softly to it. Campbell couldn't hear her words, but they were quiet and pleading. The Kadaicha looked at her, its head cocked to one side. Then, its face twisted with anger, it walked forward, brushing the girl and the old man aside.

Campbell barely managed to throw himself sideways. The spear hissed past him and sparks flew off the rock. He saw the point withdrawn and the mighty arm prepared for another thrust. The old man shrieked in the voice of a bird, a magpie, and moved forward.

The Kadaicha also screamed, this time in irritation, and strode past Campbell. The Aborigines followed it around the boulders and disappeared. Moments passed in silence, and he was starting to realize that he didn't feel safe on his own, when he heard a scream. Scared to follow the Kadaicha, but more scared to stay, Campbell followed the others.

He walked into another clear area, and stopped in shock.

The Aborigines were watching three white men in the middle of the cleared area. The three men huddled together, naked fear on their faces. The Kadaicha circled them, its spear weaving through the air. It saw Campbell enter from the rocks, and gave him a deadly, mirthless smile. With casual speed, it thrust its spear first into one, then another, and then the third man. They grabbed at their wounds and collapsed wordlessly. Campbell knew with absolute certainty that they were dead. The girl turned a stricken gaze on Campbell.

The Kadaicha walked from the area, its back defiantly straight.

"They the ones who killed the girl?" Campbell asked.

The old man gave him a hard stare, and followed the Kadaicha.

"Come on," the young Aboriginal pulled on Campbell's arm. The two of them returned to the cleared area where Campbell had first

seen the Kadaicha. Only the old man waited for them.

"You bloody stole my bloody picture."

When Campbell nodded, the old man sighed. "You should leave things alone. That was a picture I drew when I was stupid angry. I drew it to call a Kadaicha. I called him to kill white fellars. All white fellars. All Kadaichas are bad. Can't control them. They do what they want. You shouldn't touch what you don't know."

Campbell could only nod and look down. "I'm sorry. You can have it back."

"I don't bloody want it, you stupid bastard. Pictures like this got to be destroyed." The old man leaned close. "I have to paint my body, to protect me, and then dance on the picture. Only way to get rid of picture. You stay 'way from things you don't understand, 'cause this not your Dreaming. We're lucky to get rid of this Kadaicha."

The old man turned. "Little lizard, you did good today."

"Thanks, Uncle." The young man looked deferentially at the ground.

"Only one thing," the old man said. His voice grew distant. "You got a phone there? You call up the tribe. Tell 'em to get me from Death Rock. I'm bloody hungry."

Campbell blinked. He and the young man were back in his study, and light from the setting sun streamed through the window.

"Did all that really happen?"

The young man looked closely at him. "No. Your imagination played silly-buggers with you. Nothing happened." His eyes bored into Campbell's.

The painting was still on the easel, its surface a featureless black. Nodding with agreement and uncertainty, Campbell turned from him and walked to the front door. The view over Adelaide was clear. He rubbed a tired hand over his tired eyes.

Nothing happened.

A strange sound caught his attention, and he looked up at the trees just as the other man joined him. They both stared up, a cold fear gripping their chests.

The tree was alive with crows.

As they watched, one of the crows gave a squawk, and all the birds took off, scattering in different directions.

"What was that about?" the young man asked.

Campbell groaned and sagged against the doorframe, his eyes closed tightly. "Quentin's sold another hundred of those paintings." 🍁



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Second Prize
On Spec Short Story Contest

A Killer of Men

Siobhan Carroll

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

“DO YOU WANT TO BE A KILLER OF MEN?” THE OLD Woman asks, smiling down at him through the ice. It has been a long time since anyone passed this way.

“Yes,” Rarsk says happily, and rises to meet her.

In winter the vampires come singing like wolves on the wind. They come with snowfall and drift just as coldly over the fields and worn down roads. Vampires sing high and sweet and pure, stronger than any mortal sound. Many a sensible farmer has followed their song to his death, pulled like a fish on a hook. Most villagers block their ears with beeswax at nightfall, but there are always a few who forget or claim it too inconvenient. They may live, or they may be found the next morning bloodless and frozen in the snow. Hardly a winter passes without a few bodies, but the villagers are used to death. “Besides,” they say, “what are we to do? They are vampires, after all.”

“What does it mean to be a killer of men?” asks Rarsk. They have been traveling for some time through silent forests, sometimes in one form, sometimes in another. Where the snow goes, they follow.

The Old Woman smiles. "I will show you soon," she promises. Rarsk nods and lifts his hands up to catch the snow. It does not melt on his bare skin, but clings there, cold and beautiful. Like them.

"Is that why we follow?" Rarsk asks. The Old Woman laughs.

THE GIRL IN THE SNOW IS ABOUT ELEVEN OR TWELVE, AND SHE clutches her father's gun with numb fingers. Her breath comes in icy clouds. "You cannot kill a vampire," she has been told, but it was her mother they found face-down in the snow this morning, bloodless and empty of all that made her special. Worn to the bone with caring, the mother of four had been too tired to stuff her ears with beeswax. A momentary lapse, and the vampires had sung her out of her husband's arms, out of the firelight and room of sleeping children, into the barefoot cold.

"WE ARE DREAMS," SAYS THE OLD WOMAN, "AND BECAUSE WE ARE beautiful, people become ensnared in us. They want to be beautiful too. Sometimes they are willing to die for it."

"YOU CANNOT KILL A VAMPIRE," THE GIRL HAS BEEN TOLD, BUT rage is the fire that heats her now. Someone will pay. She shifts the ice-cold metal that rests against her knees and watches the darkening sky. Silver she has, in the form of her mother's crucifix. Rowan she has, a collection of splinters forced into the barrel of the shotgun. She hopes it will be enough.

They travel through the forest like a fierce wind, rattling the branches of trees. Rarsk clings to the Old Woman's hand, for he is very young and does not know the way.

"Are those stars?" he asks, pointing at the fascinating lights that have followed them through their nightly journey. The Old Woman frowns, and Rarsk fears he has offended.

"They are stars," she says curtly. "They are warm things. Distant, yes, but still warm. And you must not love warm things. That is a moth's mistake."

THE GIRL IS TIRED OF HIDING. TIRED OF THE FEAR, THE BEESWAX, the desperate fire-talk, the fake laughter and the way people try not to look at the door when it rattles. She is tired of dark winters spent numbering the dead. It's time someone put a stop to it. It's time someone did something.

Warily, Rarsk watches the stars. Their light is sharp and comes from long

ago, although he does not understand how that could be. Sometimes Rarsk tries to sing like the stars—thin and silvery fine, above the range of human hearing. His voice is strange and frail, not like the music he strives for, but he understands the words. The song of the stars is as ancient as their light, and speaks sometimes of flame and ice, of things being born and things collapsing into night. Sometimes it does not speak at all.

The others will not miss her, not until morning. The adults are all at the wake, staring down at the bodies covered in garlic wreaths, their feet tied together with blood-red twine. Nothing should wake, but if it does, they will be ready. The girl rubs her hands over the gun, and tries not to think what will happen if she fails.

The others do not sing of starlight. They sing only when they hunt, and stare oddly at Rarsk when he tells them about the moth devouring stars. He calls them the Lean Ones because they have no names and are always hungry. They follow the Old Woman like he does, but they are older than him and some of them are very old indeed. Older than the stars, they say when he asks, but he thinks they say that just to tease him.

The first star gleams above the mountains. The girl shivers as she watches the colors fade from the sky. I'm here, I'm really doing this, she thinks. But it does not seem real.

Soon they come to a place. (Village) thinks Rarsk, as an old word swims up through his head. There is no meaning in this word, but it contents Rarsk to say it as he looks at this place they have come to. Village. He tries to sing it, but it is dead on his tongue. A useless thing. He lets it fall back to the place it came from, like a stone returning to earth.

The gun is cold and heavy, and her fingers have gone numb from holding it.

Like spiders they spin dreams to catch unwary things. Rarsk sings of glass palaces, and a princess and a dolphin-torn sea. A barefoot woman stumbles from her lantern house into the snow, blue and drifting.

"This is what it means to be a killer of men," says the Old Woman, and she shows him how.

But you cannot kill a vampire, they said.

Rarsk drinks memories. Old pieces of love and anger flare up briefly before they die—so many hot things flowing in this woman. Afterwards he lets her down into the snow and watches the life run out of her like a river.

She reminds him of something, this woman who is smiling even though she has turned blue and cold. Kneeling, he touches her frosted cheek with a finger, but it does not move. He wonders why.

Moving into the forest, they sing birds down from the trees. Rarsk likes

the owl life, which is full of blood and hunting. Clutching the cooling body to his chest, he looks at the sticky feathers on his arm. They are brown and soft, and he likes them.

"Mother," he says absently. A word he was reaching for. He sings it experimentally, the way crickets sing on warm nights. It sounds like a blue moon rising.

The light is draining from the sky. Shadows spread and run into one another, forming vast pools of dark. Soon Winter's children will be moving through the forest like a fierce wind. The girl has never seen a vampire, and she feels a cold knot in her stomach as she remembers the legends. *The shining teeth, the burning eyes, Shapes out of the darkness rise...* What if her charms do not work? She does not want to die. But worse than dying is to be proved a fool, to be left broken and hollow for the village elders to point at. *An ignorant girl who tried to kill what was already dead,* they will say. They will carve it on her gravestone. The girl smiles grimly at the last thought, and clenches her teeth. She will kill a vampire tonight. She will.

If it is the last thing she does.

The burning time ends, and the Lean Ones stir in their dark places. Rarsk wakes and hugs the ragged owl to his chest. The bones make pretty noises as they splinter and crack.

"We go now," says the Old Woman. Rarsk folds the owl neatly in its place and rises to join the others.

The killers-of-men rush through the forest, shaking the snow from the trees. The ground beneath them is strewn with the frozen corpses of birds, and the woods are silent where they have passed. When they come to the village, they slow, and drift like a soft breeze over the wooden fence.

"Let us in, let us in," plead the Lean Ones in the voices of lost children, scratching on doors with fingernails that break but do not bleed. "We are so cold," they whimper, but nobody comes. Nobody ever comes. Furious, the younger ones circle the houses, snarling like wolves.

Rarsk does not play these games. Moving ahead of the others, he stands under the curious garlic charms and bats them back and forth like a cat with a piece of string. It is a good night for hunting and he is happy. Behind him, the Lean Ones begin to sing, strong and sure. Rarsk leaves the charms swinging in the rising breeze, and drifts further into the village.

Night has fallen. The girl shifts in the wind, trying to prevent her legs from going numb. What if the vampires do not come tonight? She will freeze to death in this cold. She raises her hands to blow on them and as she does she sees it: a small boy drifting over the fro-

zen path. His feet do not touch the ground.

Rarsk sees a warm thing crouching in the snow. The Old Woman has told him to stay away from ones like this, but he is curious.

It is a vampire—it has to be. About as old as her youngest brother, but with a dream-haunted face and eyes golden like the sun. It looks like an angel from a lore book, she thinks as she shifts, the cold weight of the gun pulling at her hands.

The thing in the snow is a girl. Rarsk remembers this word and sings it aloud, but the girl neither comes nor goes. Instead she flattens herself against the snow like a raccoon, and stares at him with hot eyes. An odd thing.

“Girl,” the vampire child says, or at least that is what she thinks it says. No clouds of breath come from its mouth. It stands perfectly still and watches her the way a stone watches—cold and dead and silent—and perhaps she is only imagining it watching her.

“Who are you?” she says, anything to break the awful silence. The silence and stillness have pressed her flat against the snow and she cannot move anymore, not to grip the gun, not to use it. Maybe if she can get the vampire to move, to speak, maybe then her hands will work again. Or maybe, she thinks drearily, I have frozen to death.

“Rarsk,” he says, “I sing.” It is hard to speak, to move his tongue around those rough, growling words the way humans do. But the girl’s eyes widen, and he thinks she has understood.

The vampire’s voice is rough and uncertain; it creaks like a door that has not been used in some time. If only the vampire would move, then maybe her hands would have the strength to lift. But the vampire can move faster than she can, and she will die as soon as it attacks, and her blood will be spilt all over the white snow as a warning to those foolish enough to try and kill vampires.

“You killed my mother,” she says desperately, anything to keep this vampire talking. She does not want to die.

“We are dreams, and there are those who give up everything to live in us,” *Rarsk says to the hot-eyed girl. This is the Old Woman’s song he speaks, forcing it into the harsh contours of human language.* “There are many things that would die to be beautiful, just once.”

“You kill them,” she says.

“We make them live forever.”

“You kill them,” the girl says, and she still cannot move her hands.

“We drink their lives and they live our dreams,” says Rarsk. He is puzzled by this warm thing, which is getting cooler, and the sharp hot bits

round her edges. The others have passed him now, but he is not hungry and will not hunt just yet. Not when this interesting warm thing is here. "I will sing for you," he says, because he likes singing and is tired of shaping everything into rough dead words.

The vampire throws back its head and sings to her all the wonderful things in the world. Alabaster cities and gong-tormented seas. Fire and frost, starlight and the sun hanging over the desert. A smoke-eyed princess and a golden bird, children eating blackberries, the sound of a river running under snow...

She is dreaming a thousand dreams and drowning in them. She feels as though her vision has been yanked open so that she can see, not just the snow and Rarsk singing in the starlight, but the entire world. And there is an edge (would you like to be beautiful) to step off, a place in the center of all this, a chance to be beautiful and extraordinary instead of dull and mundane, and with a sudden shrill fear the girl knows she is dying and her fingers clench with the shock of it, and the gunshot splits the world in two...

THERE IS A SILENCE THAT FALLS LIKE SNOW—PURE, WHITE, AND cold.

In some places it lasts forever.

RARSK SITS ON A HILLSIDE, LETTING THE SOOTHING COLD SEEP back into his bones. The stars above him are empty and lost. "Monster," he says. It is the name of the thing that tried to hurt him, the thing that lives in the warm place and feeds the sun with fire. The thing he used to be. Rarsk hugs his knees and rocks himself back and forth, making the small misery sounds animals make in traps. He can smell the Lean Ones in the forest. He knows what he should do but he does not wish to.

But the stars above are bleak and cold. They will not help him anymore.

Rarsk raises himself to his feet. With deliberate slowness, he picks up the hot things within himself: words, sounds, names, pictures, his mother's face, the shape of the sun, the way the water rushed into his lungs as he tried to gulp air... They hurt to touch, but he gathers them anyway. One by one he picks them up, and drops them into the darkness, which is colder than ice. He hesitates when he comes to the last one, the one that is closest to him, but he knows what he must do. With a sudden wrench of loss, he throws it over the edge.

The killer-of-men was doing something important. It can't remember what, but that does not matter because the task is finished. Clicking its teeth in satisfaction, it turns its back on the fading stars and goes down to join the pack.

IN WINTER THE VAMPIRES COME SINGING LIKE WOLVES ON THE wind. They come with snowfall and drift just as coldly over the fields and well-worn roads. In one village lives an old woman who once spoke with a vampire and lived, or at least that's what people say about her. Every winter she sits by an open window, waiting patiently for someone who will never come back. Sometimes she cries, because a gunshot left her deaf many years back, and she can no longer hear the vampires singing.

It's hard to live without dreams, she says if you ask her, but most of the time she says nothing at all. ♣

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Third Prize
On Spec Short Story Contest

Getting Pissed With the Minotaur

R.W.C. Sylvester
illustrated by Ronn Sutton

THE SPAN OF THE HORNS IS MORE THAN THE span of my arms, and the shoulders are like the arches of a pagan temple. The ring in its nose might moor a galley in a storm, and the double-bitted axe could take my head off twice at one stroke. Half bull, half man; the rumbling voice crawls from a Labyrinth of its own.

“So ... what will you gain by killing me?”

Summoning all my courage, I reply, “The freedom of Athens from King Minos.” Looking up and up at it in disbelief, I feel I am staring from the foot of the cliffs of Sciron. In truth, I doubt I can kill it at all.

In the low chamber the beast scrutinizes me with crazed, blood-marbled eyes. “Nine years already?” The head sways, brisket snapping. “I expected more than just you. Usually there are maidens.

What happened to them?"

There are two bowls of wine and an amphora, now almost drained, on a table fashioned from the slim bones of the youths sent before me. This snuffling abomination has a rude sense of hospitality.

"There's only me this time. Theseus."

"I thought you might be someone. Theseus, the son of Aegeus? Well, no one knows for certain if you are Aegeus' son, do they? Most think Poseidon sired you on Aethra."

I shrug. Nine doors lead to this room. I haven't seen the sun since I entered the maze three days ago.

"That's me," I murmur.

"You're immortal." The beast snorts; its matted brow creases pensively. "At least, that's my understanding."

As I prepare my dry-mouthed challenge, the brute raises his axe, wide as a sail, and lambastes me with the flat of it. Reeling back off my feet, I am flung head over heels through the nearest door. The dull slap resounds a full minute through the Labyrinth.

Inside the chamber I hear the monstrosity mutter, "Just checking."

I stagger back to the table and the monster pushes a bowl at me with a hoof four times cloven in hideous approximation of fingers. It fumbles with its own bowl and, muzzle immersed, drains it at a draw. I drink as well, with a head full of dented gongs. I think my jaw is broken. The rim of the bowl tastes of blood.

"Your immortality could be ... a problem," the beast says, awkwardly replenishing our bowls and draining the amphora. "It may violate the terms of sacrifice. If you're Theseus, that makes me...?"

"A minotaur."

"*The Minotaur*. Drink to a courageous death." He raises his bowl, a fragile artifact between the hooves, and again inhales the wine with a sound like a pump in the dregs of a cistern. "If you kill me, *the Minotaur* ... how will the sacrifice work?"

"There will be none. The murders will cease."

"No, no ... they're not murders. They're offerings: a few offered so others can live. Others like you." Pawing the gristly table: "Where were you the last time the youths and maidens of Athens were sent ... and the time before that?"

"I was in Troezen."

"Never heard of it." The Minotaur hoists a new amphora, prodigious; he impales the cork on a horn and opens the jar with a neat toss of his head. I imagine him piercing and tossing me likewise. He

pours wildly and wine overflows the bowls, courses down through the bones of the table. "I hope they taught you to drink there."

He guzzles two more bowls, pounding them back like a myriad of myrmidons.

"Every time your father the King sends the youths down, I'm certain it's the last time, but here you are again." The bone table groans like slaughter when he crosses his forelimbs and leans in at me. "If these kids are being slain for no reason, why doesn't your father stop sending them? What would happen?"

"Minos would destroy our city."

"Athens." The Minotaur overflows the bowls again, all the while musing, appallingly human. When his head takes a certain attitude, in a certain light, I look away. "Tell me all that has happened to you since you came to Athens."

So unfathomably deep is the creature's voice, tuned almost below the ear, that I am not sure what it said, yet it stands—again, not an axe-arc from me—hulking and expectant. Flies swarm its cavernous nostrils and yellow eyes. Amazed at myself, I begin to relate how, arriving in Athens, I was expedited through guards and gates to an audience with my father, the King. He received me, though he did not yet know me. He offered me wine prepared by Medea, his wife, and I was about to drink when he struck the cup from my hand with a cry.

The Minotaur leans closer, raising an eyebrow the size of a sweeping broom.

King Aegeus had seen his own sword at my side. At that juncture, I brandish the same sword at the Minotaur, but against his bulk it, too, disconcertingly resembles a sweeping broom.

Medea had discovered me as the son of Aegeus and feared I would supplant her own son Medus as heir to the throne, so she told her husband, my father, the King, Aegeus...

"I'm not explaining well. I'm more warrior than poet."

"I should hope so. She told him what?"

"That I was a spy and that I meant to commit regicide, the murder of a king."

"I know what regicide is," the Minotaur growls darkly.

"Medea had poisoned the wine, and so my father almost poisoned me."

Wine and flies burst from the Minotaur's muzzle when he laughs, a taurine bellow. "A fine welcome! What did you do to her? Is there

a word for killing a queen?"

"I don't know. But afterwards I was welcomed with much hospitality: the Athenians roasted many hecatombs of oxen."

"Not my idea of a good time," the Minotaur frowns distastefully.

"What possessed you to ever go back to such a place?"

"One day I will rule there."

"I'm sure you will." The Minotaur stands, overbalanced somewhat by his gigantic torso. "Come on, I'll show you the Labyrinth. Bring the wine."

Slinging the amphora up onto my shoulder, intoxication takes me like a gale. My head thunders a thick violet fire and my weary legs begin to yield as if the stupendous axe-blow has never left me.

He catches me up in his cloven hooves. "Feel it now, don't you? Don't worry, it's not poisoned. This is from Minos' cellar." He presses the bowl at me. "Here: one more for the maze."

If there is an abattoir in Hades, this horrific subterranean maze of illusion and geometry is the only corral that would contain the Minotaur before the quartering and hanging. Strewn with crushed bones, tatters of Athenian silk such as maidens wear on the offering day, and grim epitaphs gouged in the walls, the Labyrinth is a sameness of stone, at all hands a dim monotony of branching passages. Trudging or spurred by desperate fear, vainly navigating by temperature or sound, by panic or the gods, after days, one would recognize—as the youths and maidens must have—one's own footsteps in dust, one's own filth or desiccated skull marking the intersection of two narrow passages. The maze echoes with cries and flowing water, with the scrape of a hunting monster.

"Quite a place when you're pissed on the King's wine, isn't it?"

He calls back over his tremendous shoulder where the axe is slung. If I am not mistaken, the blade is impressed like a coin with my profile. The Minotaur is still clear-headed—though it is difficult to say with minotaurs—and sturdy as he lumbers ahead, filling the tunnel like a barricade. Steadfast as he may be, I am alarmed with how the passage doubles, pitches and wheels; I steady myself with an outstretched hand. The other hand goes into my pocket and gropes to play out a strand of wool.

"Do you know Daedalus?"

I nod sickly. "I know who he is."

"In that man it was clear there's no difference between genius and madness." The beast grows excited, his bow-legged pace quicken-

ing. "You know that twisted prodigy built this Labyrinth: there are parts of it even I've never seen. Of course, after I broke through to the wine cellar, I didn't get out so much. What an aberration he was: lineage unknown, pitched from the royal house of Athens as a murderer. He served Minos until the King nailed him for pimping my mother to the White Bull ... so he's close to my heart. As punishment, Minos locked him up here in the Labyrinth which he, of course, had designed and which he, of course, escaped..."

The Minotaur whirls on me. "You see what kind of a man this Daedalus is."

I have heard stories of his percipience and treachery.

"Why have you stopped drinking?"

With one more bowl I will be begging the Minotaur to put my head on the block. I hope he does not notice the thread I lay out behind us; indeed, I hope I am still laying it out. Now I have somehow misplaced my hands.

"Escaping this maze, Daedalus fashioned wings for himself and his pin-head son, Icarus, and they left Crete. I hear Daedalus made it to Camicus."

"So the legend has it." I for another feel like I have tumbled from the sky.

"It's no legend." The Minotaur leans down so close his flyblown nostril engulfs my head like a visored helmet. He tilts the amphora at my lips. "Drink to him, who lived according to no code. Not even the gods knew what he'd do next!"

When I am sputtering like a drowned man, wine rising in my gorge and my hands flailing, the beast lowers the jar and drags me shambling on through endless tunnels, up and down cramped stairs. The skein spills from my pocket in knots and coils.

Where the passage broadens, we stop. The Minotaur bids me rest; I see he is getting drunk, too. I collapse by the amphora and conceal my thread as best I can. He pours me another bowl; the eighty-third, if my count is right, which I pray it is not.

"So..." he gulps like a calf, trying to focus on me. "Between this Troezen place and ... what do you, what is ... Athens ... Athens: in between, what did you do?"

"Labors."

"Can you elaborate, young Theseus?"

He pushes the bowl across the floor with his foot, and I realize this beast is abominable not because he is half bull, but because he is half

human. It is a sturdy foot in a gold sandal; the Minotaur's leg is well-shaped and muscular with bearing the huge torso. For a heartbeat I am stone-cold sober.

Then I am drunk as I ever was, probably more drunk than before, regaling the Minotaur with my labors along the Isthmus of Corinth: there I met Periphetes, who from nowhere cudgeled me across the back of the head with a club the size of a side of beef. No sooner had I bested him in his turn than I came upon Sinis the Pinebender who meant to catapult me into the sea. I did for him as he intended for me, but hot on his heels was the wild giant sow, which buried its tusks in my guts ... and so it went, and I weary in telling it: every gods-damned mutant and cretin along the Isthmus was on me like gravy on a roast. Looking back, it's a blur, drunk and mazed as I am: all I recall is hauling my woe-begotten bones pillar to post back to Athens, battered and abused, wishing for the end of that parade of labors that would have sent Heracles to the wall.

Actually, I feel worse now. The Minotaur has wandered off down a long, aching, bloodshot hallway...

"Why did you go by land?" he grunts. He is next to me again with fetid breath. The bloodshot hallway was in my head. "Why not by sea?"

"I had to chasten the tyrants of the Isthmus."

"Who told you that?"

"I took it upon myself."

"Did you?" The Minotaur swills back another pot of wine and splits in two, but the next restores him before he can notice. "Really, Theseus: why are you here? And don't tell me you could not stand by while the youth of Athens went to their deaths. Why are you *really* here?"

If not that, what reason can I give? My father is king in the city and one day I'll take his place. I've come for the same reason I tamed the Isthmus: because it is expected of me. Or because I expect it is expected. Either way, I took the hammering of my life there, and this Labyrinth will probably make the Isthmus look like a stroll across Lesbos.

Without waiting for the answer I don't have, the Minotaur hauls me up by the lapels; the skein of wool leaps from my pocket of its own volition and scuttles down a side passage. The Minotaur watches with hooves on hips.

"I guess we go this way. Did Ariadne give you that?"

"She did."

"You should have asked her to knit you a sweater."

Naked to the waist and necklaced with snakes, I first saw the daughter of Minos at the feast honoring the Athenian youths and maidens and, seeing me, the blood rose to her breast. She was a feral priestess and that night, with no words spoken, we had all our desire. The fleeting creature we made, too, was half man and half animal. Later, she cooed wickedly that I should mourn for my brothers and sisters from Athens while I still had breath, but with her body serpentine against me, a Labyrinth of hungers, and her words caressing my impending death, I had no care for the youths. I would have sent them to the maze while Ariadne and I twisted in her bed.

"She wants to go to Athens, doesn't she? She's been trying to get off the island since Daedalus escaped."

How she adored Daedalus and his lawless brilliance, and how she was transfixed by the Labyrinth. She stood with me at the threshold of his masterpiece, marveling at the diabolical architecture he had devised. She fixed the end of the thread to the door-post, explaining that when the Minotaur was dead I should signal her with a pull on the string, and she would gather the skein, lead me back to the living world.

"Will you take her with you?"

I can still feel her mortal hands on me; I know an island where I might conceal her for a while, but it would be poor judgement for the future Athenian king to take Minos' daughter as a mistress.

"Future king?" The Minotaur scowls. "I'm talking about *now*. Do you want her ... do you want her with you?"

"It's not exactly part of my mission..."

The Minotaur gives me a long, contemptuous leer.

"You really think you're getting out of here alive, don't you?"

We walk deeper into the maze. At length, I venture: "So ... I'm not a virgin."

This stops the Minotaur in his cloven tracks.

"What?"

"Is that not the agreement? They say 'youths and maidens,' but they really mean virgins, don't they?" I try to shut myself up, but I am borne on a wave of wine. "Well, I'm not one. There was Ariadne, and before there was—"

"What do you think goes on down here?" The Minotaur snorts indignation. "I don't give a damn if you're a virgin. Youths, maidens,

virgins ... that's all King Minos. You think he'd ask for seven soiled guttersnipes and seven harbor whores? What kind of tribute would that be?" He pours wine as if dousing the Olympian flame. "You are the stupidest future king anyone could ask: you must understand what this sacrifice means ... will I tell you? Keep drinking, you'll be glad later. Does Minos want virgins ... does he want victims? Does he throw these Athenians' sucklings into the maze to keep *me* happy? Of course not." He sloshes his wine and spits vehemently at my feet. "Old Minos is leaning on your father, and your father submits ... sends all his maidens and youths to their gruesome, unspeakable, subterranean deaths ... time and again."

The Minotaur's enormous head rolls back with wine and carnage dreams.

"Once those kids are in the maze the ritual is long over, and then it's just—"

The axe is out again, swinging again; so much time and I do not think to move. The flat of the axe tosses me high against the wall and the impact sounds like laughter from the bottom of a well.

"Why do you come for me? Kill those kings if you want to be a hero." He wrenches my arm from its socket dragging me to my feet again. "Not me. Not yourself."

My mind is wine-dark concussion seeping from a cracked vessel, but I remember why I've come. I have no strength or courage, but I have my mission.

"So you do," the Minotaur replies. "The wine's almost gone, and I want you to be a hero ... so let's get to it."

He lays his axe by the door.

Now ... and I'm staggering in the Minotaur's shadow, bones underfoot, my eyes like cloves in a ham; I couldn't find my sword if it was sticking out between my ribs, but I struggle to remember the fate of Athens is with me. I try to think past the colossal battering I am about to receive, to the day when I parade that beastly head triumphant through the city streets. Maybe the Minotaur is more drunk than he looks, and maybe by some impossibility I'm less drunk and more invulnerable than I feel. I'm hoping for a quick, clean kill. I'm hoping the stones will open and swallow him whole.

"I know it has to be this way," the Minotaur rumbles. "I don't want to change the order of things, don't want to tie knots in the ... what is that thing? A skein? ... in the skein of your destiny, Theseus. I'll struggle, of course. I may ... *harm* you, but remember the gods have

worked all this out in advance. When it's finished, I'll be dead, and you'll be left standing ... more or less."

He slides down the stone wall, top-heavy or dizzy or resigned, and sucks at his wine. "But when you get back home and you're giving my head the scenic tour of Athens, don't let on it was a done deal from the start, that you're just a cog in a predestined working." He spits dregs in the bone dust. "I know you're no poet, but try to invent something heroic for yourself, something like Daedalus would come up with. The mortals will like that. Now, do you know how to do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"How to kill me? It's a good thing I'm here. There's just one way, and it's not with the old man's sword, so throw it down and come here."

The sword clatters on the flags beside the great axe. Stricken with terror once again, I stand over the Minotaur. He could catch me up in his arms and drive me through the roof to daylight as easily as smoke up a chimney. My head would emerge in Minos' garden like a bruised squash.

"You need to break off my horn and drive it through my heart," he laughs. "What do you think of that?"

Reaching for the sweeping horn, I miss it the first time. I am neither as sober as I should be nor as drunk as I wish I was. I seize it with both hands and belabor it with main strength, the while expecting the Minotaur to gut, gore and trample me. He suffers it like a dumb beast.

Adjusting my stance my feet tangle in the skein. The bones roll beneath us. When I look down, there are double Minotaurs, a brace of horns; when I raise my head the room gyres like Charybdis.

With abrupt disgust, the Minotaur lurches to his feet and I am left hanging from his brow.

"Another drink, Theseus. For strength."

We share the jar yet again; the labyrinth could be a single room where he has led me in circles and I wouldn't know it. I swear off wine and all things supernatural.

"If I am guardian of the Labyrinth, young Theseus, don't you want to know what am I guarding?"

I am sobered, knowing my mission is only nominally heroic; that, offering himself, the Minotaur has cheated me even of the appearance of mortal triumph. With this last question he evinces that, apart

from an ill-defined sense of obligation, I have no idea why I've come.

"But if you hadn't come, you would be the scourge of Athens ... am I right? Cheer yourself: the good citizens appreciate your pains and tribulations." He raises his bowl with a wry snuffle. "And don't they bear *your* pains with great fortitude."

The Minotaur's shoulders are like the arches of a pagan temple, and beneath the mantle of hair that vast neck has been scarred by a yoke. I can't say exactly where its bull aspect becomes human. I can't think how many strokes it will take to remove that head.

"Now that I've got you stripped down to your underworld, Theseus, here's what I want you to know, here's my treasure." The creature gestures with a hoof or hand, vaguely. "A maze is only a maze as long as you are searching for the way out."

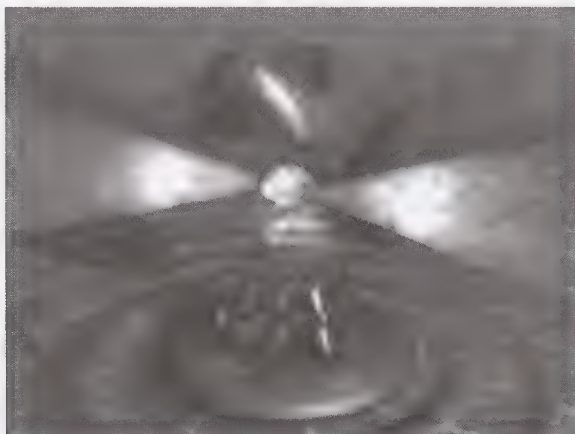
He seems much eased to have spoken this. He lumbers up, leisurely, and paces a little, slurping a bowl, not looking at me. He stoops to the skein of wool, forgotten by the door, and somehow I watch him pass the thread delicately across the blade of the axe without realizing what he is doing.

"I stalk the Labyrinth; the Labyrinth does not stalk me."

He slices the thread through, lets the skein fall, and gives a firm tug on the end of the thread. He can scarcely grasp it, fine as it is. The thread leaps from his hand or hoof, as before seemingly of its own volition. It vanishes into the maze. ♣

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Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Jack Be Nimble

Carl Sieber

I HAVE NINE FINGERS AND BLOOD ON MY hands, so I wash my hands, frequently and, believe me, with care, but the missing finger does not comes back.

It makes holding a pair of scissors slightly awkward but I persevere. I clip my bonsai, set my sound system to playing the sounds of a very distant seashore, and for almost a moment, I can forget who I am. Michael, though, interrupts this pleasure.

He's precise, neat, attentive to my moods, and whenever my mood is almost recovered he's there to destroy it again. I try to ignore him, but tonight my success is mixed. So very successfully do I ignore him that he's actually able to touch me on the shoulder before I know he's there. One of his gloved fingers taps me near the base of my neck. So precise. I spin fluidly and bring up the scissors as if I mean to stab him with them, as if I wish to bury them past their hilt into his chest; and, missing finger be damned, stabbing him would be easy.

He almost laughs, but instead turns it into a cough he covers with his gloved hand. He stinks of overconfidence. Doesn't he know I could kill him? He knows. He's seen me kill. It's a point of pride with

him I think not to be afraid. He believes he has me on a leash. And he's right.

"Jack, a bit on edge tonight?" He's in my personal space but I'm the one who steps back. "Your client, Jack, is waiting downstairs."

"Let him wait."

"I think not." He turns to leave and his elbow brushes the bonsai. "Oh. Your little tree."

Indeed. The bonsai pot falls, shatters, the trunk snaps, and I hunch forward as if he's punched me. He's not allowed to punch me.

"I can't do the trick tonight, Michael."

"Don't get surly with me." He snaps his fingers. "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick; it's time, Jack, to do the trick."

"Good evening, Jack," says Anthony, the emigration official, as I descend the stairs. Anthony's a man made out of the same mold as Michael. Only far richer, and far more powerful. Nothing he says is meant kindly, even if it comes out sounding that way.

"It's always a pleasure to see you," he says, knowing that I see him every second day and it's no pleasure for me. "I'd like you to meet Chad Harison," he continues, introducing me to a well-fed and impeccably groomed specimen of the multinational elite. "And Chad, I'd like you to shake hands with our Jack."

And there it is.

Chad's hand. Thrust out to me and trembling with that jumbled mix of desire, anticipation and fear. Every trick comes sooner or later to this point but I'm feeling rattled tonight, and before I can stop myself I'm stepping to the side and vomiting. It's particularly the anticipation that sickens me.

Michael muffles another cough.

It's really just business as usual. I am a Jack, and a Jack is expected to be high-strung doing what a Jack does. It's dangerous and reckless what Jacks do, but even so, as risky as it is, they still have to do it. Every two days according to my contract: I have to do it.

Touch people.

No one hands me a handkerchief to wipe my mouth and I must make do with the back of my hand.

"Jack," says Michael, and there's a world of scorn in his voice.

"Jack," they call me, and it brings that saltwater taste to my mouth, that nausea. Just that name alone makes me want to whimper.

Please. My name's Richard, not Jack.

But Chad's hand is still extended.

Anthony taps a sheaf of papers on the table to catch my attention and then fans them for my perusal. "Chad has signed all the necessary legal papers. There is no need, and no desire for delay, Jack. Proceed."

Deliberately late, Michael offers me the handkerchief from his suit pocket.

The last thing I want to do in this world is touch Chad. I know the kind of handshake he will have. I've touched his type before. His shake will be firm, practiced, with a very slight crush to the grip that demonstrates he has enough status to hurt me and get away with it. He responds to my glance with a professional smile, a smile he's obviously spent money on to fine tune. It's very much like I imagine his handshake will be, full of that learned control I've come to know so well. "A glass of water, please," I say to him. I maintain my eye contact with him as I make this request, but he seems incapable of believing I've asked him to serve me. Besides, Michael, always sensitive to the play of master and servant, moves to get the water.

"Jack, at last we meet," says Chad and his tone is so mocking. He's a "colonist" though, and colonists are like that: so bloated with power that the abuse of it comes naturally. And why not abuse a Jack? It's the highest mark of status, what everyone who's anyone aspires to. And because Chad, like all the "colonists" before him, has paid the total of his net worth to the Department of Emigration for the privilege of touching me, he'll be damned if he's not going to enjoy it.

"Jack," he says grinning. "Don't be shy," and I can only hope he's secretly pissing his pants in fear. That really, at heart, he's afraid to touch me

After all, I am a Jack. I am a ripper.

Touch me and you disappear. I have space-time at my heel. Touch me and those jaws of space and time will close on you. You'll go away. Far away. The guess is it's not even a place in this galaxy.

Chad is beginning to show irritation. "Is something wrong?" he asks Anthony. "Is your Jack in the proper frame of mind to do..." His hands try to explain the inexplicable. "His thing?"

Am I in the proper frame of mind to do my thing? The short answer? No. Never.

Skin to skin. Any piece of my skin touched to any piece of his skin will do it, though the Department of Emigration does prefer I do it by shaking hands because that helps preserve a sense of business, instead of the lunacy it really is.

“Rip,” says Michael, leaning in close to my ear. He fits such overt command into the word that I can’t suppress a jump in reaction. Something inside me snaps.

I hold up my hand. “Chad, do you know what will happen when I do my thing? At that point of contact, that skin-to-skin risk, do you have the least clue? I don’t. Space-time will bite, yes, but who will it bite, and how much will it feel like eating? Those sharp teeth are known to be careless. Chomp chomp goes space-time and maybe it’s not hungry enough, and chomp chomp I end up screaming, holding onto a stranger’s arm that ends wet and messy at the shoulder, or, maybe space-time is a little too hungry, and chomp chomp my index finger disappears between its teeth. And then what’s to stop it from deciding it likes the taste of me, and wants maybe my arm, or maybe my shoulder, maybe my head too, why not?”

“Jack,” says Michael. “Shut up.”

There are beads of sweat on Chad’s brow. It’s good to see him properly afraid.

Right.

Grab his hand.

Squeeze it. Professionally.

There is a scintilla of time where I look space-time right in the eye and I try not to fear because space-time can smell fear.

Chomp.

Chad’s suit falls to the floor since Chad’s no longer in it. That’s the way they all go, naked as a baby. You can’t take anything with you.

There’s nothing obviously wrong with the picture. No blood on the walls. No sliced and diced remnants of human anatomy trembling on the floor, and I still have my fingers.

Do I? Count them. One two three four five six seven eight nine. And one bonus finger. Loosely held in my grip is a finger Chad has left behind. I let Michael take it. He wraps it in his handkerchief, and leads me back upstairs. “I’ll buy you another tree,” he says.

“Do I care?” I ask myself later as I spend time washing my hands. Obtaining an actual live tree will take a great effort and cost him a fortune. I do hope he pays through the nose but other than the discomfort it will cause him, another tree won’t really please me.

After giving up trying to wash my hands, I give in to an odd mood that’s been stalking me. I fiddle with the sound system, but that isn’t what I want to do; I pick up a book, but discard it; consider picking

a fight with Michael, but he's not handy.

When I crouch down to examine the broken bonsai, I'm vicious with it. Using the stub of my index finger I push and prod, too roughly, at the exposed and torn roots of the tree. It's beyond saving, and I'm making no attempt to save it, but am I beyond saving?

The day after tomorrow there's a good chance I'll kill someone or be killed. Then forty-eight hours after that, I'll try again, and then again, till I'm dead at last.

And what attempt am I making to prevent that?

I put down the tree, find the phone, and dial a cab.

Michael meets me at the bottom of the staircase as I'm putting on my mask. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"I don't like that."

"It's part of my contract."

"Don't be so defensive, I only meant it's a nasty night out. It's winter, didn't you know?"

Of course I know. It's always been winter outside. Only the very old remember a time when it wasn't always winter.

"Please, Michael."

He fingers the leather of my mask. "Lonely, Jack?"

"Don't touch me."

"Oh Baby."

Michael's wrong. I haven't been anybody's baby in a long time.

Not since I was four years old and so sick with fever that the room wouldn't stay in focus. So sick that I couldn't tell up from down, near from far, a second from a year, and it felt like my skin wasn't the kind of skin that belonged to a four-year-old boy, but was instead something that a blow-torch flame would wear.

Both my father and my mother disappeared at that time. No one knew where they went but everyone suspected.

They were assumed to be my first two murders. Yes, I was only four, and yes, I was in no state to prevent their touch, and yes, I never asked to be a Jack, but I am a Jack. And there are special rules for Jack.

Here are two of them.

Rule one: you can't rip a ripper. Well, you can, but it's fatal. There are two instances I know of where one ripper touched another and space-time took seemingly random and god-awful vicious bites out of both of them. I always make an effort never to be in the same city

as any other ripper, because I'd be tempted to find and touch them, just for the slim hope of getting out of here.

Rule two: don't allow touch. Because if you touch someone, or if someone touches you, you rip them. And if you rip them without getting their signature on the legal documents, you've just murdered them.

Even if they touched you, and you did all you could to prevent it? Even if every time, every single time you've tried to prevent it?

A technicality.

You murderer.

THE TAXI SMELLS OF OTHER PEOPLE. "TAKE ME TO FORT SQUARE," I say as I climb in.

The cabby twists around in his seat and stares; undressing me with his eyes. I know what he's asking: how much can it cost just to touch?

It costs too much. If I break the law and touch this man I'd be arrested. Michael informs me they'd fix up a standard jail cell with a hole in the wall, a hole just large enough to shove my arm through up to the shoulder. And on the other side of that hole: clamps and straps to hold my arm there, immobile and naked. "Just quivering and ready with that Jack power," says Michael. "And you'll never know when to expect the touch."

He'd enjoyed telling me I could rip and be pampered for it, or I could rip and be punished for it. "And Jack," he explained, "the reason I like keeping you on this side of the law is so that we can print up those nice brochures with your face on the cover. Besides, the business just couldn't be as civil if we had to lock you up and tie you down."

The cab driver is still staring at me and I can't take it any longer. "Please, just drive," I say, but he doesn't, so I get out and walk.

The smog is thick tonight, muffling sound, lending haloes to the street lamps, and bringing stinging tears to my eyes. The depressing shapes of smashed and abandoned buildings I pass are also mostly hidden; buildings abandoned because the rats, and near approximations of rats took over. However I consider it, this urban catastrophe I call home is in no way a home. Even so, the city is flattered tonight, the snow and smog covering up a multitude of sins.

Snow crunches under the tires of a slow-moving vehicle that pulls up beside me. The window powers down and Michael's there in the back seat, a glass of red wine to his lips. Soon a police cruiser, lights

flashing, joins the escort.

I continue. Though it's very hard to forget who I am, I do like to walk the bitter cold streets and suck back the caustic air just as if I was nobody special

Other people though, are always there to remind me who I am. One child, perhaps four years old, wriggles free of her mother's grip and runs at me yelling "Homefree! Homefree!"

The police siren yelps, and the cops handle the situation in their way. "Down! Everybody down!" they yell out, firing shots into the air. I hear them, but I remain standing, watching people crouch down around me as if I were someone being worshiped.

Except the mother and the child aren't crouching.

The mother is still standing and for goodness sakes she's looking at me, not her daughter. And the child, she's a treasure. Rare. With the rate of un-mutated births as low as it is, she shouldn't even be out on the streets. If I could, I'd almost let her come to me. It's not her generation that has kicked this planet in the teeth.

The child is running at me, but not looking at me. She's looking through me to the other side; she's looking through me at the place she wants to be. One more shot is fired into the sidewalk between the child and me, kicking up concrete, ice, and snow.

The child stops. Lit up in blue and red she stands there shaken, and cries.

Homefree.

It's what's on the other side of the rip. It's what's on the other side of me.

Homefree. Everybody knows it's there. Everybody knows that every nightmare has some exit.

I too suspect Homefree is there, because I've heard it. I heard the sound of the sea: waves on sand, and something that I later learned was a seagull calling. It obviously had to be Homefree that I heard; there haven't been birds on Earth for more than thirty years.

No one comes back from Homefree; not now, at least. A year ago there was a sensation because apparently one little girl born on Homefree could rip. Evidently she was only three when the power manifested, but in one short day she'd sent back two people.

Except the first arrived with her heart clenched and her blood frozen, and the second...

The second arrived still holding the little girl's hand, arm, and most of her torso. He'd been unwilling or unable to release his grip until

heavily sedated and even then, even unconscious, his grip had been fierce.

Basically he's been living in the north corner of Fort Square since then, stinking of urine, gasping out a regular litany: "Spare a little change, so I can buy something to breathe, spare a little change, so I can buy something to breathe, spare a little change, so I can buy something to breathe." He repeats that all day, and the only time he does stop is when he falls asleep, or when I pass him by.

"Get me out of here," he says to me.

"What's Homefree like?" I respond.

"Get me out of here," he counters.

But tonight he breaks that pattern. "I see you're dressed for the cold now," he says to me when I find him among the benches in the north corner of Fort Square.

That's wrong. That's not what he always says, and I guess he's mocking me. Mocking my boots, mocking my gloves, mocking my tightly cinched coat, mocking my hood, mocking my mask. Yes, I need to be hidden and protected and no, I don't care to be laughed at.

"What is Homefree like?" I ask. I repeat it a little more viciously, "What's it like?" and nudge him with my boot. "What is it like on the other side?" I ask, emptying my pocket of spare change and throwing it into his lap.

He brushes it off into the snow. "Get me out of here, Jack. Please."

"Don't say that."

He grabs a handful of snow to rub his face with, and then stares up at me, fully awake. Judging me. I could almost say he found something funny about the situation.

"Never," he answers.

"Never what?"

"Never once did a ripper ask me, never once did an officer from the Department of Emigration ask me, never once did any one from the media, from the street, or from anywhere on this Earth ask me what it's like. Except for you."

"You lie."

He smiles, and his smile is brighter than it has a right to be. It's at odds with his current condition. "Why would I lie?"

"People want to know. I want to know."

"No. People want to go. They don't want to know."

That sounds somehow wrong. Suspicious.

"What aren't you telling me?"

He stands up, using the back of a bench for support. There is calculation in his eyes, but worse, I have the sense he knows me better than I know him.

"I could tell you," he suggests. "For a price." His hand lifts towards me.

I shift my body so that his extended hand is hidden from view of the limo and police cruiser. "Put your hand down. Not here, not now."

His hand remains extended. "They follow you always. They follow you everywhere. It might as well be here, it might as well be now."

"They'd call it murder."

"My information's worth it."

"Go on."

He points with his finger to my hands. "Show skin."

We remain like that for a moment, his finger pointing at my unmoving fingers.

"You came back," I say, pulling at the fingertips of my right glove, aware of how that captures his attention. "Why?"

"Don't break the bubble." His eyes don't meet mine. Not because he's evading the question, but because a small crescent of skin has begun to show at my wrist.

"The bubble?"

"Everyone wants there to be a Homefree, even if they can't get there. Especially if they can't get there. And they'd rather not know the details."

"And, is it there?"

He doesn't answer, not until I pull the glove edge to my first knuckles. "Yes. It's there. Not exactly like people want it to be though."

I can feel the edges of the bubble, and he's right. I don't want to break it. "Do they know what it's like?" I say indicating with a motion of my shoulder Michael and the cops.

"No. The truth frightens them too. They sort of wish I wasn't here."

"Interesting, but not yet worth murder."

"We're almost at the important bit."

I pull my right hand free of the glove. "Get on with it."

"I'm sorry." His eyes flick up to my face and then past. "Oh shit, here they come."

I turn, expecting to see Michael and, in that moment, I feel my

bare hand touched.

Touched.

Only then do I realize he'd whispered something just before the touch. "Richard, try it as a gift."

The limo door opens and Michael steps out. "Jack. Bad Jack. Murder."

"He tricked me!" I'm surprised that that surprised me. "And you let him."

"Goodness, Jack, you have gotten surly lately. It looks like we're going to have to tie you down." He makes a motion with his finger. Flicks it at the cops and then towards me. "Arrest him."

I run. Blindly.

I can hear Michael calling after me as I take random turn after random turn, stumbling as much as running, till I careen into one too many walls and fall down, too stunned and bruised to do anything except curl up. I check my gloves, my boots, my hood, my jacket, and my mask. I leave no skin exposed. There's a pile of cardboard and newspapers at hand and I begin to pull them over myself until an outraged voice from inside the pile yells out: "Mine!"

When the pile shifts, I catch sight of an old woman.

"Mine," she says, but at a lesser volume, as if she's willing to negotiate.

I start to push back what I have stolen but stop when a hand reaches out to touch me, tracing the stitching of my mask, then, suddenly making a fist, she taps twice, just above my right cheekbone.

"Anybody home?" The old woman's voice is barely intelligible, mixed as it is with a wheezing cackle.

I'm too startled to resist, or even to answer the question. The silence extends. There is no one home behind the mask. Newspapers move, they slide and crumple against each other until the covering is complete again and the silence re-asserts itself. Once more, to look at the pile I would never know it hid a human being.

"Wait," I say.

I'm afraid to do what I want to do. It's dangerous, it goes against every instinct of self-preservation I have, but it seems to be what I'm doing.

I tease off a glove and extend my hand, naked, catching snowflakes. I have never offered this. Never as a gift.

The newspapers rustle and there is a hiss of breath.

Homefree. I look to her face to try and catch what she sees but

I'm surprised at what I do see. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but I have the notion that it's not Homefree she's looking at, but me. She bends forward and the skin of her cheek feels light, papery but warm.

And she's gone. But easily, delicately. The rip happens without the least bit of violence.

I count my fingers. It's a habit, a small ritual I have to hold onto myself, to convince myself I survived again. I do it slowly, methodically, because I wouldn't want to make any mistakes. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten.

I count again. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten. And I'm forced to admit I have all my fingers. All of them. Even that right index finger.

"Jack," says Michael from twenty feet away, ghostly in the smog. "That's your third rip tonight. What's got into you? You used to be so careful." He waits for my response, and perhaps for the cops as well.

I wiggle my newly restored finger.

"Jack?" says Michael. His voice has a new note. It takes me a moment to recognize it.

"Careful, Michael," I say, now standing, "space-time can smell fear."

"Come now, Jack."

Now?

I look space-time in the eye and I don't fear it. Space-time gathers around me, sniffs, and smells no fear. I try something. I reach out, move through space and time, and end up beside Michael. Instantly. Naked. My finger to his lips. "Goodbye." I say to him.

He stiffens, bracing for the rip.

When I slap him lightly on the cheek his eyes snap open and he struggles for comprehension. He doesn't understand why he's still here; then he thinks he does, and then I let him know. "It's my choice now."

It takes him a moment, but he nods his head, and then, attempting to set the balance of power back in his favor, he brushes a snowflake from my shoulder.

"Michael," I say, "don't touch me, you haven't earned it," and follow that up with a double handed push to his chest, sending him reeling through space and time; falling through a rip into a place so grim, he'll remember this city as if it were Homefree.

I reach out once more and slip through space and time about three

hours backwards, and about four blocks sideways. "Hello again," I say to the man who lives in the north corner of Fort Square. "Hello again," I say, and abruptly grin as I recall how he will greet me in a few hours. "Chilly tonight, isn't it?" I say with a wink.

He's unprepared for this visitation and though his face is furrowed in a scowl of confusion, no words are coming out.

I search his eyes for that look that says he knows me better than I know him but it's not there now. "What's my name?" I ask.

"Jack."

"Wrong. Try again."

"I don't have a clue."

I've come back to discover how he knew my name, only to discover he doesn't know it. At least not yet. "My name's Richard."

"Richard," he says extending his hand, "I'm Steve." I take his hand, squeeze it, but gently, and laugh out loud at the look on his face when he doesn't go anywhere. Still holding his hand I'm struck by a possibility.

"You knew her."

His hand, still held in mine, goes rigid. "Who?"

"You know who. The little girl. The little Jack."

He disengages his hand. "None of your business."

"I'm a Jack. She was a Jack ... it's my business."

"Business? It's more like a curse."

"Yes. But maybe a gift too."

He doesn't look ready to believe that yet. "I was her father, and she was crying."

"And the other one sent back?"

He looks away from me, off into his memories. "My wife."

"Did you want to come here?"

He recoils slightly. "That's a terrible question." The emotion on his face is not anger, but old pain. "If you ask that question, you're thinking maybe I did want to come here, and maybe I used her to come here. Do you think any father could do that?"

"Maybe."

He looks at me thoughtfully. "You ripped your father and mother?"

"I was four."

"It was an accident."

"I'm not sure."

"Be sure. Children need to be touched, they need to be held,

parents do it automatically, it's an instinct. They did it without thinking." His right hand opens and closes, though I don't think he's aware of it. "You must be cold," he says, eyeing me from naked head to naked toe.

"Yes, but I'm on my way to the beach."

"You're mixed up, Jack."

"Richard."

"Richard. Are you done being a Jack?"

"No, I'm just getting started." And then, still giddy with the power of it I show him what I mean by disappearing and then reappearing behind him. He turns around when I touch him on the shoulder and I say: "Anywhere I want to go, I go." And then, perhaps unwisely, I add: "And anytime as well." I explain how I'll come to see him later that evening but in the middle of the explanation the magnitude of what I'm doing begins to affect me and I hesitate. I realize I don't know how much can be changed and what might happen if I do try to change anything.

"Richard," says Steve, breaking into my thoughts, "You can change time?"

And I know that he's asking about his daughter. "No, and don't ask me to. I can't do that, but I can get you out of here." I tell him more about what will happen later, trying not to explain too much.

"I'm gullible," I say, "you'll find a way to trick me."

"I will?"

"You will. Don't let me know I've spoken to you."

"I understand."

"Except, just at the last, mention my name."

GOOD. THINGS ARE TIDY. IT'S TIME TO WALK AWAY. NOW, BEFORE Steve realizes I'm deceiving him.

Can I change time? I don't know, but I do know Steve is right. Children need to be touched, they need to be held, no matter what, and I can't get Steve's daughter out of my head. She needs someone to hold her and I'm going to try.

I don't know how much I'm allowed to mess with time. I don't know what will happen when I do start messing with it. A ripper has never been able to safely touch a ripper before, but there's a first time for everything. Space-time gathers round me, sniffs and smells no fear, and I am Jack, anytime, anywhere. ♣

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Diva

Lisa Carreiro

CLANGING CAMEL BELLS AND THE WHISTLES and calls of a family passing under her glassless windows woke Diva. She rose quickly and opened the shutters to circulate chilly late winter air into her room. She'd been asleep only a few hours; she seldom slept through an entire night anymore. In darkness she dressed: a heavy embroidered tunic, aged and worn trousers, hard-soled slippers sewn with coarse twine. She opted to skip her usual late night cup of tea, and, wrapping a pink shawl over her head and shoulders, left her one-room apartment.

Outside, a band of migrating *chameau-gens* drowsily led their camels through the narrow streets to the city's main gate. These nomadic *chameau-gens* wintered in the gated city, passing the coldest and wettest season quartered in slums with the beasts they worshipped. The buildings they harbored in were often the remains of warehouses

with broken windows, rusted machinery and rotten stairs. Their camels might be penned on the main floor, though some clans slept side by side with their precious beasts. As spring drew near, the clans returned to their itinerant life, wandering through rural areas, camping *à ciel ouvert*: in the open air.

Diva marveled that the *chameau-gens*' spring migration was so soon to begin again. Already, with frost still coating her windowsills every morning, the nomads were queuing up, camped at the city's main gate, which would open in a day or two. Mere hours, thought Diva, as she scurried through the lane towards a dim light farther down the block. Briefly, she made obeisance to one family's camel as she passed them in the street. Two adults carried slumbering children. An older child, who should have himself been asleep, carried some of the family's possessions in a parcel on his head. He nodded respectfully to Diva's barely-seen figure. In the predawn, the family could not tell if Diva was herself a fellow *chameau-gens*, or simply a second generation *demi-gens*, a descendant of earlier nomads who had settled in urban areas.

Soft bouncy music tinkled out of Two Bar's open doorway. Diva walked faster to reach it before the chill settled into her bones, her slippered feet less sure-footed on the night-damp cobbled road. Inside the bar, barely any customers drank or danced in its dim light. These hours past midnight and before dawn were Two Bar's quietest, and therefore best for conversation with Bliss, the bartender. Bliss had been her friend as far back as their shared adolescence; now they both had silver in their hair.

Bliss waved her over to the bar and leaned across its damp counter to buss Diva's cheek.

"Fill you with what, precious?" Bliss's deep gravelly voice and bobbing Adam's apple belied her apparent gender. Her chin was shaved smooth and she wore a pink and blue floral dress. Her long silver-threaded hair was twisted into a small heap at the top of her head, and tied with a florid pink and yellow scarf. She had daubed cobalt blue dots at the outer edges of her deep green eyes, and brushed the faintest kiss of orange on thin lips.

Diva rolled and lit a cigarettete and waved it in front of herself while she ordered. "Ale, Bliss, light ale. I can't have a headache tomorrow. Everyone wants their fortune told before they leave the city." She turned to scan the bar as she blew out smoke. A lone couple danced slowly in a dark corner and two young women

laughed over a holo game. The entire bar was a high-ceilinged, rectangular old wood and concrete affair. Scores of ancient pocks, scorch marks and graffiti covered its walls. The dirty floor was littered with cigarettete butts and sticky with spilled drink. The room, even with its doors open to allow cold fresh air in, stank: stale beer, unbathed bodies, rotten food.

In one corner away from the door, a lone youth sipped from a bottle. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows. Faint light cast from a single battery lantern at his table didn't illuminate his face. He set his bottle down and leaned forward to flick something from the table top with a finger, briefly revealing his features.

Diva stared at his familiar visage. Just as quickly, the youth sat up and his face disappeared completely into shadow again, though his bare arms, partially marked with clan tattoos, still rested on the table top. The flicker of the unsteady light from the electric lantern made the patterns dance.

"He's of my tribe," Diva said, pointing.

"He's been here for hours. He was here a few nights ago and drank alone until he fell asleep."

"Did you see his marks? He's of my clan."

"His sleeves weren't rolled up before." Bliss brushed wee flakes of tobacco from the bar counter and daubed at a stain with a vinegar-soaked rag. "Do you know him?"

"He's not true *chameau-gens*. He wouldn't be here otherwise, not now at migration. And his markings aren't complete." Diva stood, took her glass of ale, and patted Bliss's hand as she left her stool. At the youth's table she set her glass beside his nearly empty bottle. He looked up at her, and she rolled a sleeve to reveal her own clan markings.

"Oh," he said with genuine enthusiasm. "True *gens*?"

"No," Diva admitted, seating herself across from the lad. "*Demi-gens*. My mother came to the city before I was born. You?"

The youth shook his head. "The most camels I've seen have been here in the last two days. I live in North City."

"You? In North City?" Diva shook her head. *Demi-gens* never lived in the North. None earned the wages to allow it.

"Adopted." The boy smiled apologetically at her.

Diva felt as if ice water had been poured over her chest. Her heart certainly stopped briefly. She lifted the lantern and held it up to see his face, then turned to regard Bliss, who poured fresh drinks for the

holo players. "Happens a lot," she rasped, still stricken. "Do you know your true family?"

The youth shook his head. "I'm happy in North City. But I did want to see the migration. I hoped to see some of my clan." He drank the last liquid from his bottle.

Diva took a long drink herself before she was able to speak again. "Few of this clan here. More in the southwest and western provinces. My mother was traveling with a seaboard clan when she stopped here for the winter. She just never moved on."

"So you stayed here?"

"Born here." Diva drank again, then waved Bliss over. She pointed to the youth's empty bottle and nodded. Bliss rolled her eyes in response. Diva could hardly afford her own drink; she could not afford to for pay the boy's. And the well-dressed youth certainly didn't lack funds. Diva tapped Bliss on the arm and pointed to the youth's empty bottle again. "He's of my tribe," she said as if by way of explanation. "He lives in the North, you know. He's here to find his family."

"Are they migrating today?" Bliss asked with genuine confusion.

"The drinks, Bliss." Diva returned her attention to the youth who sat across from her. "Lean forward so I can see your face," she said to him.

He obliged her. His skin seemed fair, nearly ivory. Probably the lantern's unsteady light, thought Diva. His brown hair was straight, worn longer at the back and shorter over the ears; a common style among well-bred moneyed young people in the city. But his face with its prominent roman nose and high cheekbones, his thin lips and deep green eyes reminded her of her own youthful visage. It's dark in here, she told herself, but stared again at the youth's tattooed arms. The faded black pattern circled only his wrist with a thin swirling blue line to his elbow. Started, no doubt, when he was small; more would have been imprinted on him when he reached puberty. Had he reached puberty among his own people.

"What's your name?" Diva tried to see his face better in the dim room. Bliss returned with the drinks and the youth took up his bottle and sipped. He expressed no thanks, not even an understanding of what her gesture had cost her. He must have been in North City for a long time. "When were you adopted? Do you remember your family?"

He smiled, a little arrogantly Diva thought, before answering. "I

am called Arantu; I don't know my clan name. I was very young when I moved to the North. I was very lucky I suppose, after I was orphaned. Is it true that when a mother dies, any clan member can take her children on the migration?"

Diva slammed her palm on the table top and spat on the floor. "You say that as if it's a bad thing! What's wrong with looking after orphaned children?"

"Saved me a life of nomadism," Arantu said, hurt feelings unhid. He shuddered slightly. "Out there," he said, waving fat white fingers toward the city gate.

"If you were born to a true nomad tribe, you probably wouldn't have been taken by a North family. Nomads take care of each other's children." Diva began to roll herself a cigarettete with unsteady fingers. "I'll tell you and you listen. You listen!" She put the cigarettete in her mouth and struck a match against the side of the table. Drew in the first smoke as she shook out the wee flame, and spoke again while she exhaled. "*Demi-gens* children are taken from their parents, their living parents, and sold to the North families."

Arantu opened his mouth and lifted a hand, but Diva clasped her own hand around his wrist and held it. "Sold," she said with emphasis. "Taken from lone parents on the pretext that we cannot raise our own children." She paused and smoked before speaking again more coolly. "Life in the cities is hard, so is life as a nomad. That doesn't mean we love our children any less, or can't feed and shelter them, too."

Bliss's voice startled her from her speech. "It's too quiet tonight. Let's dance, Diva."

Diva slapped Bliss's outstretched hand away. "We are talking."

Bliss touched the youth's hand formally, cautiously. "You, dear? You want to dance? All alone here in this dreadful bar. Have some fun."

Arantu stood up quickly, laughing and nodding. Diva snorted as the pair strolled away from the table to the clearing patrons used to dance or fight in. No one else remained in the bar. Likely, few patrons would arrive until dawn cast its first light and people returning from night jobs would stroll in to drink and dance. Bliss would be cleaning the last of the spilled beer and sweeping butts from the floor when the next bartender arrived. Diva smoked and frowned, watching the pair dance and laugh. The ungrateful spoiled soft Northern boy. She reached for his bottled beer and poured half of

it into her own glass. It was a sweeter brew, and weak. She drank it anyway and waited until Bliss and Arantu stopped dancing when a stray patron staggered into the bar and Bliss had to attend to him. Arantu didn't sit down again when he returned to the table, but instead nodded pleasantly at Diva.

"I'm sorry but I must be going," he said. "I have a long way home."

"You come back here again. Not here; not this bar, but this part of town. Be here to watch the Nomads leave when the gates open for spring. Ask the *chameau-gens* about your clan. Ask the *demi-gens*. Don't ask your Northern people; they don't know."

Arantu shrugged. He picked up a jacket, flung it over one shoulder, and drank his beer standing up.

"Do they bother you at all? When they see your markings," she pointed to his forearm, "do they bother you, your peers?"

"No," he said, and then sat down suddenly. "No," he said again more gently, "many of my friends are also descended. No one bothers me, not anymore." He rose again. "I am sorry."

"The black lines," Diva pointed to the youth's marked arm, "those are partial clan markings. Southwest clan. And the blue is for water. You were very small when you moved to North City. You probably still have blood-family here in this city."

Arantu shook his head. "They are dead. Or I was abandoned. Either way, my true family is in North City." He had the decency to blink as if embarrassed. "I must go," he whispered.

Diva watched him leave and then poured the youth's leftover beer into her glass. She returned to the bar and sat with a grunt.

"You can't drink that beer," Bliss said.

"I paid for it."

"No, I mean it's too weak for you. You can't drink that."

"I paid for it." Diva sipped and shook her head. "Bliss, that's my son."

"Oh, not again," Bliss nearly collapsed on the bar, face falling into hands. She set her palms on the counter and stood upright. Her voice dropped a tone. "You think every lost child with a marking is yours."

"No, no, Bliss. He's my son, certainly. I saw the arm very closely. I know the markings, he's of my clan *and* of my family. He's my son, Bliss. That soft little sugar-fed boy is mine." Her voice caught and she gasped to keep from weeping.

Bliss touched her hand thoughtfully. "It's dark in here. And there are so many lost children. So many who come from the North to

see us.”

“Don’t dance with him. Don’t flirt.”

“Oh, I was just bored. He’s too young, too ... he’s a North boy.”

Diva stared at her oldest friend. “Bliss, he’s your son, too.”

“We never ... never proved he was actually my, my, uh, spawn.”

“Spawn?” Diva started laughing, a bitter note coloring the sound.

“Bliss, you know I had three partners the night I conceived him. Three under a full moon during the vernal celebrations. Enough partners to guarantee a child, no more. I knew as he grew out of babyhood, he was yours.”

“I was drunk that night and so were you. It never mattered. I cared for him as much.”

“Don’t dance with him again.”

“You were scaring him. Lecturing him. He just came here out of curiosity, whoever’s lost child he is. He won’t be back anyway.” Bliss grabbed a rag and began to scrub the bar counter. “I thought you’d tell his fortune or share your funny stories, not lecture him.”

Diva rolled a cigarette, thin to save her precious tobacco and herbs, lit it, and smoked silently for a moment.

“At least,” she said softly, “I can leave now.”

Bliss was farther down the bar, still scrubbing passionately. “Puh, you’re not dying. Not yet. Old and rotting, but far, far from dead.”

“I know that,” Diva snorted. “Fool.” Bliss glared at her. “Bliss, don’t be angry. He is my son.”

“What does that change? He won’t come back, not really. We’ll never see him grow.” She stopped scrubbing. “My heart was broken, too, you know. You aren’t all alone with that pain.”

“I know, precious.” Diva drew in sweet smoke, exhaled a cloud, then gulped the last of the beer from her glass. “But, softened and sweetened, he is all right. They didn’t slaughter him or starve him or beat him to witlessness. So I can move ahead now. When he was a baby, I was waiting for him to get big enough to join the nomads. Then he was taken from me. But now I can go. I still have a few days to find a clan that will take me.”

Bliss stared at Diva, rag limp in one hand.

“I am able to let him go. I’m done mourning him. Time to pack and leave.”

Bliss blew her breath out. “You’ve been threatening to go nomad for years. You always scare me. Stop this, it’s childish!”

“It’s our roots, Bliss!”

"Roots, puh! It's a difficult life! If you don't grow up with it, it's even more difficult."

"*Demi-gens* turn *gens-réaliser* every season."

"Young *demi-gens*, young. Children. Youths. And many of them still return the next winter and resettle in the city."

"Some."

"Diva, you don't know. You were born here. I was nomad until my twelfth winter. Life in the city is easier. Your apartment is a far better home than *à ciel ouvert*."

"I'm adaptable. And fortune-telling has become a lost skill among the *chameau-gens*. That's why so many of them come to me here. I can be useful. I still walk far."

"You'll collapse when you run out of tobacco."

"Give me your blessing, Bliss. I can't leave without your blessing."

Bliss tossed her rag to the floor and slapped the bar counter. "Dear good creatures of the planet, you're serious! You're serious! Go home and sleep, Diva. Precious, you're tired. You've had a shock. Go home and sleep. I'll never bless such a mad plan. I need you here and you'll die *à ciel ouvert*. Go."

Diva rose. "I am going, Bliss, but you're coming, too. I'll walk you home. Look at you, you're tired, too. Your feet must be sore."

"These shoes," Bliss waved down at her feet, "these poor old shoes."

"Here now, Lelapin is arriving to tend the bar. I'll walk you home and take your shoes. I'll fix them. And the embroidery, look at it. So faded. I'll touch that up. Come, Bliss, I'll walk you home."

Bliss walked around the counter and took Diva's offered arm. "My poor feet. Can't stand all night anymore ... and you, at our age, threatening to go nomad! Your feet wouldn't survive a night on my job, let alone the distance of the *chameau-gens*."

Diva said nothing, only listened to her friend complain while she walked at her side.

The winter sun shone warm in the late afternoon. An endless stream of patrons, *chameau-gens* preparing to leave the city, came to Diva's apartment for readings. At an interval she pulled her tattered sign indoors and closed the shutters over her windows. She carefully packed a bundle, one easily carried, and abandoned heavier and useless items in the apartment. She closed the door behind her, but left it unlocked so that a squatter could stay under the roof at least until

the landlord realized she was gone.

Under one arm she carried Bliss's shoes, fresh with new soles and bright yellow and pink embroidery. She'd sewed even while she peered at tea leaves and the palms of the *chameau-gens*. Diva wrapped the shoes in soft beige cloth tied with a blue ribbon she had found in her sewing kit. She also tucked in a shawl and two wraparound skirts. They'd be short on Bliss, who would wear them anyway.

The wooden planks to Bliss's apartment creaked under Diva's light steps. She bounded into Bliss's rooms without knocking; neither knocked on the other's door, ever.

"Precious, your feet won't hurt tonight," Diva said and held out the package with the shoes.

"Aaah," Bliss declared laughing and unwrapped the package. "Yes, old friend, these shoes can't be mine, they're too sturdy. Oh, feel, they'll support these old legs, yes!" She gently touched the new embroidery with callused fingertips. "I've got some tobacco for you, precious. And I will buy you a beer."

"Thank you, but I don't have time for the beer. I've come to say good-bye and get your blessing."

Bliss turned to Diva. She tossed the shoes on a table. "Oh, stop it. That nonsense! Stop! No, I will not give you any blessing. Go, and you go alone!"

"Bliss, precious. Old friend. Please, listen to me, listen. I am not that old. I am strong and well. I spend more time with the *chameau-gens* than with my own *demi-gens*. I'd beg you to come with me, but I know that's not your heart's dream. So I will go, and miss you, and bless you every day I still breathe. But I must go. My son is found. I have no reason to stay here."

"You have me." Bliss turned away and fingered the shoes.

"I have you, yes. But I have told you for years, if I ever found my son, I could go. I would go."

"You don't know how difficult that life is. You've romanticized it." Bliss turned again to face Diva. "Camels are difficult and demanding masters, and you're not accustomed to them. An obeisance, a prayer to the beast as you pass it on the street is not the same as its full-time worship. And *chameau-gens* literally worship them; you cannot conceive of their belief."

"I know the histories," Diva said.

"Histories, puh!" Bliss actually spat. "Legends, tales, misconstrued stories. Camels as gods given by gods. Diva, these poor people are

just descendants of homeless people. Who used livestock and bicycles. Some began to use camels and it simply... caught on."

"Book learning! City book learning! Our ancestors would never have managed without camels, however we came to have them!"

"The camels are—were—are our saviors. Our gifts. But they are a difficult little god. Did you ever even ride a camel? Or feed one? You've seen them have tantrums on the streets. They turn and kill in rage. And the life, the travel, the illness and hunger... Diva, the rain and heat. Babies are born and then die in dirt by the roadside. And the languages, you can hardly speak any of the languages."

"I speak with *chameau-gens* from every clan every day!" Diva shouted.

"You do not know," Bliss pleaded. "You truly don't."

"Please," Diva said. "I am leaving. Please give me your blessing."

"No." Bliss stood still, her hands resting on the shoes on the table. Her breathing was ragged, her head bowed. She still did not look at Diva.

"I know more than you think, old friend. I am with our people every day. Yes, I am as lost as my son, but now I can return without wondering, or waiting for him to return to me. He doesn't need me. I am free to go."

"I need you." Bliss raised her head, but still did not turn.

"Give me your blessing, friend. I'll try to be here next winter; I will see you then. Your shoes will last till then."

"Damn my shoes, I am not weeping for my shoes!"

"Please give me your blessing." Diva stood in silence, still. Her bundle was clutched under her arm. "Please, Bliss."

Still with her back to Diva, Bliss waved a hand lightly in the air. It might have been a blessing, or a curt dismissal. Diva took it for a blessing and smiled and began to weep silently. She breathed in deeply and blessed her old friend, and vowed in her mind to see her again. Then she left Bliss's rooms, stepped down the planks, and walked in the late afternoon chill through the narrow cracked-asphalt streets to the gates to find a clan. 🍁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

The Wedding

Wilma Kenny

SOME OF WHAT I'M GOING TO TELL YOU TONIGHT has been patched together from what I overheard, but most of it I saw with my own eyes. I was there, though I was only nine or ten, and I danced with him myself. None of the others can say that. I'm an old woman now, but it's as if it all happened yesterday.

The bride was a cantankerous one, everybody agreed, but nobody expected the Gentleman himself to come to her wedding. Wood's Cross was a small town where nothing much ever happened and, what with it having been named for the bride's very own great-great grand-dad's Christian grave marker, you'd have thought it would have been more or less immune from such a thing as happened that night.

Maybe it's best to begin by saying right off that nobody around Wood's Cross really believed in the Gentleman. Though they didn't exactly disbelieve, either. They'd named places after him—"Devil Lake," "The Devil's Saddle"—I can see by your eyes that you recognize that last one, and know the story that goes with it. Laugh if you

want to, but you and I both know the road crews have never lacked for dynamite, yet the road still goes around that particular hunk of granite. They'll give you all kinds of reasons if you ask them, that road crew, them and their fathers before them, but what it all comes down to in the end is that nobody wants to risk meeting the owner coming back to reclaim his saddle. It takes a lot of liquor and a heavy dare to get a man to pass that spot in the road alone at night. Most of the ones who brag they've done it are liars. Maybe all of them.

But to get back to the night in question. Are you sure you want to hear it? The whole story, or as near as I can piece it together, after all these years?

I never completely found out what lay behind a conversation between my parents after I had been sent to bed one night. Hearing their voices raised, I peeked down through the stovepipe hole and saw my father, eyes downcast, face red. I heard Mother sob, "The devil can take her, for all I care!" After that my father stamped outside and chopped wood in the moonlight for a long, long time.

"She's a cuckoo in the nest," Mother said more than once when talk turned to the upcoming wedding, and people would laugh and nod. When I asked what she meant by that, the grown-ups' euchre game stopped and I got a whole pile of unwelcome sayings dumped all over my head: "Little jugs have big ears." "It's way past your bedtime!" "Sometimes those who say least learn most." I thought about cuckoos, and decided the bride-to-be must sit around all day squawking and demanding attention while her parents flittered about, anxious and eager, but never able to please her. I know now that she never belonged in Wood's Cross. Her flirting, teasing ways shook the foundations of more than one quiet respectable family; there was a lot of community pressure on her parents to get her married off.

People talked about the bridegroom, too. "Blinded by beauty," they'd say. "She's after the house and farm." "Won't last." Even to me then, he seemed an unlikely choice for her to have made. Quiet and shy, he was never much of a ladies' man, and, as far as I know, never looked sideways at a woman, before or since. Probably what caught her attention was the fact that his father had died the spring before, leaving him with a big stone house and one of the best farms in the district, to say nothing of the fine handsome horses they had been breeding. A better judge of horses than women, he must have been flattered by her attention.

The wedding started out ordinary enough. My younger brother

was an altar boy. I sat with my parents, well back on the groom's side of the church—he was some sort of distant cousin. Then the bride arrived. I'd never seen such a dress and even at that age, I knew it wasn't the right thing for her to have worn, cut half-way to her waist both back and front, and fitting that tight, down to where the side slit started. Her stockings, which I could see a lot of, were black. My mother made a sound between a grunt and a gasp, and glared over her shoulder at my father, who looked like a thirsty man coming up to a well. The groom went scarlet, and the priest, I swear the priest made the sign of the cross, though my brother used to insist it must have been my imagination, for it wasn't in that part of the service.

The service went ahead like any other wedding. I held my breath when the priest asked whether any man knew just cause. The whole church was deathly quiet for what seemed a long time. I don't know what we expected; Mother had told me nobody ever came forward that late in the process, but I heard her draw in a long breath when the priest finally started up again. I wasn't sure if she was pleased or disappointed.

After the wedding dinner, we helped clear the tables and pulled them back around the walls to leave room for dancing. The piano and two fiddles started up, and the party began. Every man in the room wanted a dance with the bride; I doubt the groom even touched her hand again after their first turn around the floor. Even the priest, and that's where it began. He had an unfortunate way about him, that priest, always coming up too close to a person, wanting to pat more than your head. His breath was foul. If he'd asked me to dance, badly as I hated sitting all night on the sidelines, I would have looked for an excuse to refuse him. When he tapped the bride on her shoulder, she stopped absolutely still for a moment, then chuckled and said in a low voice that carried over the music, "Why ever not? I'd dance with the devil himself if he came to my wedding!" The dance went on. Somebody soon tapped the priest on the shoulder, and he went back to his usual comfort in the bottle.

I had drifted off to sleep, my head on my mother's lap, so I didn't see the Gentleman arrive. Folks say it was just after midnight, and that the door blew open in a mighty blast of wind that made the lamps flare up, smoking their chimneys, leaving the room dim when the flames dropped. I woke up fast enough to the grip of my mother's hand on my arm, and a great voice that came from a long way off, calling for more music, saying the night was just begun. A voice not

easily disobeyed. The priest, give him credit for that much, stepped alone onto the dance floor raising one hand to his forehead, fumbling with the other for his rosary. "None of that here, old man!" boomed the voice, "I was invited, and you heard it." Something flicked the priest back against the wall like the spider he was. He lay there in a heap until some of the men carried him home to bed.

Then a tall man, so handsome I couldn't take my eyes from him, hair blacker than the crows in the cornfields, was bowing to the bride, holding out his hand to her, smiling in a way could break your heart. He glanced at the front of the hall where the piano player, face white, eyes staring, was backing away. The fiddles started up, and there were five or six of them now, though I could never quite tell what the musicians looked like. You couldn't see them at all unless you looked off to one side of them, like trying to see stars.

That dance was wilder, faster, more wonderful than any I've ever known, or could hope to see again. No one sat down all night. The Gentleman hadn't come alone; neighbors whirled past me, dancing with shadows, whispering to forgotten lovers, long-dead husbands. Every woman in the hall wanted to dance with Himself, you could tell by the longing way they stared, but he danced only with the bride. Except for one. He suddenly stopped in front of Mother, bowed, and said, "I believe, Madam, that I'm doing you a favor this night. For that, you must allow me one dance with your daughter." When he reached out his hand to me, the darkness of his eyes had no bottom. I tore myself from her grip, not once looking back. I never danced such a dance, ever before or since. We dipped and spun, the people stared, and my feet knew the music, every note and rhythm, as it flew from the bows. Far too soon, I was back in the strangling clutch of my mother's arms.

The dance, the night, ended as fast as they started. The black of the windows began to grow grey, and robins started to sing for the sun. The Gentleman and his bride headed for the door, hand in hand.

Just as they were leaving, she stopped, right in front of the groom. He reached both arms out to her. Silly fool still would have taken her back, were she willing to come. She slowly lifted her skirt up, up, away up, right in front of his eyes, and even more slowly she pulled down off her leg the blue garter she'd borrowed from her sister. Threw it right in his face, laughing. He carried the mark it burned on his cheek to his grave.

Her veil caught on a limb of a tree outside the hall, like Absalom's hair, but she tore free. That veil was the last anyone ever saw of her. Nobody spoke her name again, though we all talked about that night, in one way or another, from that day to now. The priest was never quite right in the head again, and the hall burned to the ground at sunrise.

People have probably told you my mother's curse marked the rest of my life, that no man would ever marry a woman who had danced with the devil. I say the choice was mine; I've refused several. I've just never met a man could fill the want that came into my heart that night. 🍁

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Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Io You

Shawn Brayman

KATHY DRAGGED DR. MARKOWITZ FROM THE ruins of the scout vehicle, *Hermes*. *Thank God this is Io*, she thought. *Heaven help me if his hundred kilos were at Earth normal*. Kathy's petite body shook from the combined stress of the hours in the crippled ship, the crash, and the task of manhandling the stocky Marvin Markowitz across the rugged terrain towards the planetary rover.

She opened the airlock and hoisted Markowitz into the small surface rover, a combination mobile laboratory and recreation vehicle on six wheels. Looking back she saw a three-meter long gash down the side of the scout ship. The frame was intact but the tear had allowed the *Hermes*' atmosphere to escape into space. *Marvin's landing may not have been elegant, but it sure beats ending up a permanent resident of Jupiter*. Climbing in beside Markowitz, she cycled the air and entered the rover.

Kathy pulled Marvin into the rover's cabin, then checked his suit integrity. It had saved his life, but he remained unconscious and his

left leg was bent at an unnatural angle.

She reached down and inched his head off the floor, then removed his helmet. She turned off the suit's life support functions then placed her ear by his mouth. Soft and rhythmic breathing brushed against her cheek. Using her left hand to hold his beard away from his mouth, she bent closer and detected a slight gurgle.

Shit, it's one thing to straighten out a broken leg, but if there's internal bleeding what am I going to do?

"Dr. Markowitz, can you hear me?" Her hand reached out to shake him, hesitated and withdrew. She rose up from her knees and stepped over to the driver's console and the radio.

"*Olympus, Olympus, this is Hermes. Do you read? Over.*" She waited several seconds, but the sound of static was the only reply. "*Olympus, this is Hermes. This is an emergency. An uncharted asteroid damaged the ship and Dr. Markowitz crash-landed us on Io. We did not reach Europa. Repeat, we did not reach Europa. Dr. Markowitz is injured and the Hermes is no longer space-worthy. Does anyone copy? Over.*"

Unmoving, Kathy stared out the rover's forward view port at Io's unforgiving landscape and listened to the crackle of the radio. After a while she realized the dampness she felt on her hand was from tears falling off her cheek. She brushed her eyes with her sleeve and re-focused on the scene before her. She drove the rover around the left side of *Hermes*. An angry scar was all that could be seen where the communications array and emergency beacons were supposed to be located.

"Great, just great. No communications and no emergency signals." The rover's communications system was designed to link to the *Hermes* then be redirected as required. Unfortunately, the *Hermes* was a dead end. No one could hear her. Climbing up from the console, she returned to Dr. Markowitz's side.

"Dr. Markowitz, please, you have to answer me. We're on Io, but the *Olympus* will be looking for us on Europa. They'll never find us here in time. The *Olympus* is supposed to start back to Mars in three days, or they'll miss the orbital window. The radio and beacons are out and I can't contact them. Please, Dr. Markowitz, what do I do?"

Another warm stream of tears started down her cheeks. *It's not supposed to be like this! For eighteen months everyone bosses me around, and now, the one time I'd like someone to tell me what to do, there's no one here to do it.*

Kathy, or Katherine as she preferred to be called, was the youngest

member of the twelve-man survey team that had departed from the Mars colony a year and a half earlier. They had spent the past six months evaluating sites where a permanent colony in the Jovian system could be established. In a crew composed of experts, she was the only member not to have at least three doctorates following her name. Playing a glorified gopher to Dr. Marvin Markowitz, the team's leading planetary geologist, was a small price to pay to have been selected for the crew of this thirty-month mission—until now. She wandered back to the drive console and sank into the seat.

Glancing out the forward port, Kathy was captivated by the image of Jupiter. Unconsciously, her hands grasped the armrests as the feeling of falling into the planet became overwhelming. Jupiter appeared forty times larger than the Moon did from Earth, filling an incredible portion of the sky overhead. The famous red spot had just come over the horizon on Jupiter—a storm three times larger than the planet Earth.

As Kathy watched she could see the red spot creep closer. Jupiter rotated every ten hours, the fastest in the solar system. Io, the moon she was on, was also moving at quite a clip—orbiting Jupiter every forty-two hours. She did some quick math in her head. *Twelve hours*, she thought. *Twelve more hours and that spot will have traveled around the full diameter of Jupiter and be coming over the horizon again. In twelve hours I'll be that much closer to being dead. In seventy-two hours the Olympus will be leaving orbit with, or without, us—Newton's Law won't wait for stragglers. That means I'll see the red spot rise five more times before they go.*

Exhausted and despondent, she dropped her head into her arms and fell asleep.

KATHY AWOKE TO A LOW MOANING NOISE. MARKOWITZ, THE source of the noise, was moving his head from side to side. Kathy rushed over to him.

"Dr. Markowitz, Marvin, it's me, Kathy. Can you hear me?" It may have been her imagination but she was convinced that the moaning increased. "Dr. Markowitz, you saved us from crashing into Jupiter, but now we're trapped on Io. Time's running out and I have to signal the *Olympus* so they can rescue us before they're forced to leave the system. We only have about two days before we're stranded here forever and I don't know what to do."

A mumble escaped from his lips.

"I can't hear you. Please, Doctor, try again. What should I do? How can we signal the ship?"

Markowitz's eyes fluttered open briefly—a glazed and confused look on his features as he struggled to speak. "Volcano. Go to ... volcano."

"Volcano, Doctor? What do you mean? What volcano—why?"

There was no answer. His eyes closed once more and the moaning abated. Kathy could not elicit a response to any further questions. Trying not to jar him, she stripped off his space suit and carefully repositioned his leg. She removed a Med-kit from the wall then applied a pain killer patch to the back of the doctor's arm. Kathy had been trained in first aid as everyone was, but had never applied more than a Band-Aid in real life.

Is it more dangerous to leave the leg as it is or to try and set it? If he thrashed around the bone could cut his artery and he could hemorrhage. Okay—straighten it and apply a splint.

She sat down on the floor of the rover and stared at the leg, afraid she would cause more problems by trying to fix it. She took a deep breath and, before her courage left her, grabbed his leg and pulled with all her strength. Markowitz groaned. Kathy could feel the bone grind into place. Using two pieces of plastic and some bandage she applied a splint.

After a few moments her stomach settled down and her thoughts returned to her other challenge—getting in touch with the *Olympus*. The trip out to Europa was the last excursion for the survey team and was not supposed to have lasted more than twenty-four hours. Marvin and Kathy were supposed to place some final instruments there and then return to the mother ship with plenty of time to spare before the *Olympus* departed for Mars. Now time was running out.

Kathy paced back and forth in the cramped confines of the rover, her mind a jumble of conflicting thoughts. *Why would Markowitz want me to go to a volcano? Maybe he was just delirious.*

An hour later, no closer to an answer, Kathy decided action was better than just sitting there. Donning her space suit she cycled out of the rover's airlock and walked over to the *Hermes*. *I might as well see what I can salvage while I try to think this through.* A while later she had topped up the air tanks on the rover from *Hermes*' reserves and moved over some food supplies. A solar sail that had not been removed from *Hermes* after someone's experiment on the pressure of solar winds was the last item to be stowed.

Not much of a haul, she thought. Maybe I can use the sail to act like a giant mirror and signal someone. We've got enough food and air to last four or five weeks, not that it will help much after Olympus leaves the system.

As she looked up into the sky, the ever-present image of Jupiter captured her attention again. *No wonder they called you the king of the Gods. And here comes your giant red eye, right on schedule. Twelve hours gone and sixty left to go.* Kathy sighed. *I might as well head out; I'm doing no good here. The reactor in Hermes is offline and I've got no radio or other method of communication. Maybe I can figure out what Markowitz was mumbling about along the way.*

After loading the salvage onto the rover, Kathy climbed aboard. She cycled the air then re-entered the cabin and removed her suit. Markowitz was in the same condition—unconscious but alive.

Kathy activated the rover's SPIN system, the Solar Position and Integrated Navigation system. SPIN used a series of optically sensitive chips on the top of the rover to triangulate her position to within ten meters, based on visible celestial objects. Pulling up the topographical map of Io, Kathy located the nearest active volcano. Although rugged, it seemed the trek should be achievable.

She was afraid to leave the familiarity of the crash site, but the fear of inaction outweighed it. *If anyone finds the wreck they can follow my tire tracks easily enough. Hermes has nothing to offer me.* With a final look around, she pointed the rover at the horizon and pressed the accelerator.

THE RED EYE OF JUPITER WAS CLIMBING OVER THE HORIZON again. Like Earth's moon, Io always kept the same face towards Jupiter, leaving the monstrous apparition always in view. Kathy had begun to feel that the red spot actually was the eye of a god, looking down on her insignificant life as she crawled across the surface of Io. Every twelve hours the gods decided to check in on her to see if she had survived.

Rubbing her eyes, she looked down from the heavens to the landscape around her. The view above was mesmerizing, with the giant, swirling bands of color on Jupiter's surface and the brilliant arcs of lightning that flashed intermittently.

She had just finished backing out of another box canyon. The terrain was treacherous; she had made just over three hundred kilometers from the site of the wreckage. The SPIN system ensured that she knew where she was, but that didn't help in selecting a route.

Based on the map she should reach the volcano in another nine or ten hours, thirty-four hours after the crash. That would give her less than thirty-eight hours to contact *Olympus*, last in orbit around Ganymede, if they were to effect a rescue. After that time, the *Olympus* would be accelerating away from Jupiter and Kathy would have a five-year wait until mankind returned. With air for only five weeks, it wouldn't matter if anyone ever came back. She needed to know what to do when she got to the volcano!

Easing off on the accelerator, Kathy brought the rover to a rest. *Time for a little bio-break and check on the doctor.* The rover was about two meters wide and five meters long, containing a small galley, a toilet (or head as all the nautical types called it), two fold-up bunks, a small lab section and a desk. It reminded her of a small camper-trailer on Earth—okay for a weekend, but hell for a longer stay.

She stepped back to the sink and splashed cold water on her face, trying to wake up for another leg of driving. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she brushed her short brown hair from her eyes.

I'm a living example of the pendulum theory, she thought, staring at her reflection. *I might look like my mother but I sure don't act like her. Mom's assertive and outspoken and I'm shy and quiet. But that doesn't mean people have to tell me what to do—especially Mom.*

For years she had been trying to tell her mother, chief astrophysicist at the Mars colony, she was no longer a child: "Mom, I graduated top in my class. Stop treating me like a child—and call me Katherine, not Kathy!"

The response was always the same: "A mother's allowed to treat her little girl like a child, Kathy. You'll understand when you have kids of your own."

Well, I wanted to get out from under everyone's wings and cut my own path. Here I am. God, I'd give anything to be back with my mother right now! I'm not cut out for this "Robinson Crusoe on Io" stuff.

Kathy turned away from the sink then stepped over to check on the doctor. She had lifted him onto the lower bunk and strapped him in before leaving the *Hermes* site. She leaned down and once again listened to his breathing. No change, still the quiet gurgling.

"Dr. Markowitz, it's Kathy. I'm on my way to an active volcano like you asked, but I need to know why! What am I supposed to do once I get there?" Kathy gave him a gentle shake and repeated the question. The doctor suddenly started thrashing and choking.

"No, doctor—don't die! I need you to tell me what to do." Kathy

turned him on his side and slapped his back as he spat up some bright red blood. Searching through the Med-kit she found a coagulant patch and applied it to his arm.

"This is twice I've saved your life, Markowitz! You owe me!" The response was a rasping exhale. Kathy realized that her hope that Dr. Markowitz would regain consciousness was futile.

Give yourself a shake, girl. No one's going to help you. I'm a geologist and every bit as good as Markowitz ever was. Why would I go to a volcano to signal the Olympus? It's not like I can generate giant smoke signals.

A small vibration rattled the equipment in the rover, one of Io's endless seismic disturbances. *They're getting stronger*, she thought. *Okay, I know Io has dozens of active volcanoes because of all the tidal forces with Jupiter. If I want to create some kind of flare it needs to be clear that it's manmade—not one of the natural explosions. I could create a sequence of flares so the timing is evident. How do I do that? There's nothing in the wreckage or on the rover that I can use as a fuel for a flare.*

Looking up at Jupiter, she considered the types of gases in its atmosphere. Her mind jumped back. *The volcano—that's it—that must be what Marvin was thinking. Volcanoes shoot out sulfur, water, hydrogen and CO₂. If I can use electrolysis to separate out the hydrogen and the oxygen from the water, I could use the hydrogen as the fuel and oxygen as the oxidizer!*

Elation collapsed into despair, with a sigh. *There's no way. The lava from a volcano will be hundreds of degrees C, and I can't cap it to redirect the gas.*

Sitting still, she tried to clear her mind. *I'm close to an answer, but what is it?* She let her mind wander back to her days in school on Earth, sitting in the student center reading, drinking, watching the birds around the fountain...

Fumaroles! The vents along the side of the peak that eject only gas. I could spread the solar sail over a fumarole, let the gas condense from the cold, then use the equipment in the rover to separate the water. If I can collect enough, I can release the oxygen and hydrogen in bursts and ignite it with a spark from the rover's batteries. It'll work—but the time, God, the time. I'll have to get going if I want to get this set up.

Kathy hurried back to the driver's console. With a new sense of confidence, she accelerated the rover towards her destination.

THE GIANT RED SPOT HAD RETURNED, WITH A MALIGNANCE SHE hadn't felt before. She stared down into the ravine from the cliff top—

a ravine not on her charts. Looking up, she saw her goal—the volcano was no more than fifteen kilometers ahead, but separated from her by an impassable trench. The maps in the rover were based on the *Galileo III* probe from two years earlier. They would be updated from the data collected over the past six months by the *Olympus* survey, but that wouldn't help Kathy now. The nearest alternative volcano was three hundred miles away, too far to be reached on time. She had to get across the ravine!

She looked right, then left. It didn't seem to matter. The left was towards Jupiter, towards the eye. *Damn, if I'm going to fail, let me do it fighting.* She turned to the left—challenging the gods.

Twenty minutes later, a collapsed section of the ravine wall appeared on the far side, where the cliff face was lower.

I can use that collapsed section to get out of the ravine, she thought. *Now what I need is one on this side so I can get down there in the first place.*

Thirty minutes later, she stopped on the ravine's edge. A section of the cliff wall had collapsed and appeared wide enough for the rover to descend. Kathy stepped back and checked the restraints on Markowitz's bunk. Everything in the rover was tied down. She walked back to the driver's console and strapped herself in. She considered getting back into her space suit and suiting up Markowitz as well, but if the rover failed in the descent, Kathy wasn't sure it would matter for those few remaining hours. Taking a deep breath, she said a little prayer. Since she didn't really believe in any gods, she directed the prayer to Zeus, or Jupiter as the Romans called him. The rover started over the edge.

Kathy felt like a mountain goat precariously perched on the side of a cliff. Of the six independently suspended wheels on the rover, the three on the outside took turns dropping over the makeshift roadway's edge. Kathy inched the rover down the cliff face, a few feet at a time, until she finally reached the bottom. Only then did she notice she was soaking wet from nervous perspiration. Now, safely on the floor of the ravine, she parked the rover and went back to the galley. She filled a bulb with water, drinking it down in seconds, then repeated the action. Her hands shook the third and final time that she emptied the container.

I don't know if I can take much more of this, she thought. *I haven't slept in over thirty hours—I'm scared, I'm exhausted!* She glanced over at Markowitz lying on the cot. *I have to keep going. After I get the sail over a vent on the volcano—I can sleep then.* Reaching into the Med-kit, she

grabbed a stim-patch and applied it to the back of her arm.

Moving back to the driver's console, she then headed up the ravine, towards the collapsed section she had seen earlier. *Another hour and I'm home free.*

THE ROVER'S WHEELS WERE SPINNING. SHE HAD STARTED UP THE face of the opposite cliff on the collapsed section, when the three wheels on the right side had slipped off the ledge. She was hardly off the ravine floor and couldn't move forward or backward. She looked at the chronometer—time was passing far too quickly. Kathy punched the console in frustration.

She put on her space suit then exited the rover to check how the wheels were positioned and how she could regain some traction. After a quick survey of the situation, a plan formed in her mind. She reentered the rover and set the drive into reverse at the lowest possible speed. The wheels spun hopelessly. Next, she set the computer to automatically turn off the drive if the linear position of the rover changed by more than ten meters. Exiting the rover again, she watched the wheels spin slowly.

Okay, this thing weighs about 1800 kilos but I'm operating in about one-sixth gravity. That means I need to lever up about three or four hundred kilos. According to Archimedes, I should be able to do this. She moved to the side of the rover and extracted a length of pipe that was strapped alongside. She carried it to the front and rolled a boulder up near the bumper then placed the length of pipe under the bumper, moved to the far end of the pipe, and pushed down. The wheels on the inner side caught briefly and the rover moved back about a meter.

A couple of more times and maybe the rear outside wheel will catch. Kathy repositioned the boulder and went through the routine again. On the fourth try both of the rover's rear wheels caught and it slowly pulled itself back twelve meters and stopped.

Kathy moved the boulder off to the side, strapped the pipe back on to the rover and reentered her small home. *Okay, but this time a little more carefully.*

A short while later the rover sat on the top of the cliff face with a clear road to the volcano. Within the hour she parked the rover on the side of the volcano beside an active fumarole. Kathy saw the sporadic gusts of vapor and gas being vented by the volcano.

I'm here! I've made it, at least this far. Exhausted, she climbed back into her space suit and went to work setting up the apparatus to

collect the gas.

SHE WATCHED THE GIANT EYE CLIMB OVER THE HORIZON ONCE again. *Two days gone. Only one more day until the Olympus is forced to pull out. Are you rooting for me or laughing at me up there?* She walked back to Markowitz on the bunk.

"Marvin, it's me, Katherine. I don't know if you can hear me, but I used some small boulders to secure a solar sail over a vent on an active volcano. I can see it ripple as the hot gases are expelled then condense from the cold of space. It would've been faster if you'd been able to help, but I managed to rig up a pump and compressor on the rover to cycle the gases into some empty tanks. I've set the generator to break down the water and extract the oxygen and hydrogen. I don't know if this is what you were thinking, but it's the best I could do so you're stuck with it.

"I don't think there's enough time left. The time I lost getting here, well..." she trailed off. "The only thing we can do now is wait and see how quickly the gases are collected." Katherine stripped down and climbed into the upper bunk for her first proper sleep since the crash.

THIS MUST BE WHAT HELL SMELLS LIKE—SULFUR AND MISERY. IT WON'T work. She checked the gauges again to confirm the worst. There might be enough hydrogen being vented by the fumarole, but the water content was too low. Without the oxidizer her flare would not burn. In a week she might have enough oxygen, but by then, there would be no one around to see it.

Katherine went over to check on Marvin. His breathing was shallower and more irregular. She had used the last of the coagulant patches earlier. There was nothing more she could do. If help didn't come soon there was no hope for Markowitz.

What am I thinking? I've been down here for sixty hours now—only twelve more before the Olympus departs. If help doesn't arrive soon, I'm as dead as Markowitz. They'd been gone for over two and a half days and it was clear no one knew where they were.

Although she felt the effort was in vain, she refused to surrender to the fates. Once again she put on her space suit and went out to check the sail and the other apparatus. The gas was slowly accumulating in the tanks—but all too slowly.

HER GIANT RED-EYED FRIEND SWUNG INTO VIEW ONCE MORE. *FIVE times you've come back to check on me. Time's up.* She had accumulated enough hydrogen but insufficient oxygen to generate the flares. Earlier, while she waited for the tanks to fill, she had rigged exhaust valves and pipes from the hydrogen and oxygen tanks and a simple ignition system linked to the rover's generator that would ignite the flares. There might be enough oxygen to ignite two blasts, but that was all—not enough to form a definitive signal. She figured they could survive for another three or four weeks with the supplies on the rover—they had a source of water, but limited food and medicine. And the air in the rover... Katherine paused.

What the hell—I might as well create a few fireworks on my demise, rather than sit around here for another month. She moved back to the cot and took the straps off Marvin then encased him in his space suit. She checked the environment levels in his suit—sufficient for seven hours. Pulling on her own suit for the last time, she recharged her suit for seven hours as well. Turning on the rover's compressors, all of the remaining atmosphere was transferred into the environmental tanks. She opened the airlock, not bothering with the traditional cycling process since the inside of the rover was now as cold and empty as the space around it. Leaving the port open, she went outside and transferred all the remaining oxygen from the rover into the tanks filled with the gas from the volcano.

With the rover's oxygen reserves there might be enough to do the job. Katherine moved back into the rover and sat beside her make-shift console. *What kind of signal to send? When in doubt, let tradition rule.* She vented the tanks for three seconds and pressed the igniter. A flash of flame lit up the sky. Three seconds later she repeated the process, then once again. Waiting for ten seconds, Katherine vented the tanks for five seconds then ignited. A flare, more brilliant than the first ones, chased the darkness away. She repeated the larger flare twice more, then three more of the shorter flares. She started the sequence a second time, but was only half way through when the oxygen ran out. The hydrogen left in the tanks vented uselessly into space.

"Dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot," she said aloud. "SOS, Save Our Souls!" *A useless exercise other than making the others feel guilty about leaving us, since they must be accelerating out of the system by now anyway—with no turning back.*

She watched as the giant red spot drifted over the horizon of

Jupiter, trapped in its perpetual circle of the planet. *That's the last time we'll see each other. Thanks for keeping me company.* She went back and lay down on the upper bunk.

A LOW RUMBLE WOKE KATHY FROM HER SLUMBER. *THE DAMN volcano has erupted*, she thought. *Rather than asphyxiation, my last moments will be spent in the flames of incineration.* She looked out the port to see *Minerva*, one of the other two scout ships attached to *Olympus*, descending. Seventy-six hours had passed since the crash. Her mind was numb with the realization they were being rescued.

Ron, the *Minerva*'s pilot, helped her move Marvin into the ship. Ron hadn't stopped talking since he landed.

"The captain made Mars commit to send out a booster we can rendezvous with on the way home. That bought us an additional forty-eight hours in the Jovian system," he explained. "But the search was focused on Europa since we found part of *Hermes*' communication array out there. With only two scout ships left and a dozen moons to search, we felt that focusing around Europa had the best chance for success. The Captain hoped some of the orbital satellites could cover the other moons."

Ron turned to confront Katherine. "How did you do it, Kathy? The captain almost dropped on the spot when he saw the SOS. It was like the heavens called out on your behalf. God, that was incredible."

She looked out the forward view port. The *Minerva* was getting a gravity assist from Jupiter, to move back into a matching trajectory with the *Olympus*. Staring down at the red spot, she turned to Ron. "There may have been a little divine intervention at that—and the name is Katherine." 🍁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Cowboy Bill

James Keenan

COWBOY BILL TUGGED ON MY LEASH AND I took quick, lock-kneed strides to keep pace. My eyewraps displayed a holo of kelp yields from Malaysian Undersea and the sing-song voice of the editor whispered in my plugs. I was blind and deaf to the world. Bill's plastic hand touched my shoulder and I turned. Bill pressed and I sat and cushions hugged my torso.

Acceleration pushed me against a neck brace, telling me that the railcar had launched. The holo scrolled to match my eye movements and as the report closed I flicked a pad inside my glove to file it. I blinked to open another one.

"Pardon me," Bill's flat voice came through the plugs. "You are behind schedule on seven of nineteen tasks."

"Thanks."

"You have a personal message, flagged urgent."

I recognized the address and accepted. Connie appeared, round

face and eyes the flat gray of a naval ship. I could see her squeezing her joystick and felt her grip on my glove hand.

"Jack."

"I haven't forgotten," I said. "I'm on my way."

"Security queried me. They're after Rory."

I excused myself and logged off. The wraps turned black and then transparent. Cowboy Bill, a meter and a half high, stood with leg pistons splayed and its head cameras pointed at me.

The plugs filled my ear cavities. Their foam surfaces contracted to create a gap, and a whoosh from the railcar engines became audible.

Eight other people were seated in the car, wraps on, and guides stationed nearby as Bill was for me. Outside the window, glass, concrete, and primary colored plastic streamed past. A multi-level grid of rails and spherical junctions snared the city like a net.

I whispered, "Am I being tapped?"

"Negative."

That satisfied me only a little. Bill could probably detect my employer or a hacker but not Security. I reconnected with Connie.

"Rory's eccentric," I said, "but he'd never—"

"Judge people as they are."

"He's my cousin. Yours too."

"I don't want to see his face at the ceremony." Her hand flashed across the screen. "If he calls, tell him that."

She closed. I stared at the menu until Bill told me that I was behind on eight tasks. I sorted five files as the railcar docked and Bill led me out. It told me to log off.

About twenty of my relatives were in a chamber, positioned in a precise semicircle by our guides. Before us, a spotlight reflecting off its metal hide, stood a new guide.

Rory was absent. Connie, in blue, her suit cut like a sack with pleats, strode over and crossed her arms under my nose. "Well? Did he contact you?"

"No." I twisted the end of my tie. A tone sounded and a door slid open to reveal the Factory Rep. She had gray hair, seven cobalt rank pins over her heart, and wrinkles like barbed wire. Her guide had extra memory blocks fitted to its waist and a high gain antenna.

"Who is the nurturer?" the Rep asked.

Connie made a half wave, a demure gesture I had never seen her do. The Rep called for the initiate and Connie presented her four-

year-old son. His eyes were huge.

The Rep recited the usual words and our faces settled into grins. The boy scratched his butt. Connie hissed and he stopped.

The Rep stabbed the new guide's controller, its cameras lit, and my aunt swallowed a sob. The Rep asked Connie's son a question and I heard his voice quiver but couldn't make out the name.

She shook a water rattle to flick a few drops on the guide.

"From this day on," she spoke directly to the boy, "you have a helper and guide and it shall be named ... Warpmaster Ninja."

I glanced at Bill and pictured him, from long ago, in Stetson and pistols.

The boy sneezed and tried to wipe his nose on his sleeve. Warpmaster Ninja held his arm and produced a tissue from its pouch.

The tone sounded again and we bowed as the Rep left.

We hugged. My step-uncle's breath smelled of denture clean. Our guides sat us at dining tables with plates of tortellini already set, and Bill extended a suction tube from its index finger to sample my meal.

"Seventeen percent fat," Bill said. It used my knife to scrape the cream sauce to a side plate for removal.

Connie was on my left. "What's your fat allowance?"

"Fourteen percent." I tasted a forkful and let the ricotta melt on my tongue.

"I'm at twelve."

My aunt touched Connie's hand. "The toil of motherhood isn't over. I found you the most precious tutorial."

She logged in and her wraps opaqued. I pried the last particle of pasta off my plate and decided to check my mail.

A loud voice resonated through my plugs and I emerged to find Rory. His square jaw was soft now, and his plaid shirt billowed around his waist as if he was deflating. He talked, bit into a crusty roll, and spewed crumbs.

"...couldn't RSVP Connie. My guide has the day off."

My aunt giggled. "You're so jocular. Connie was telling us how she intends to monitor her son's applications—"

"Why bother?"

"Spoken just like a man." My aunt waved a finger at him. "Mothers invest thousands of hours—"

"Without ever questioning the programs."

Connie drove her fork into a cauliflower. "I will do it to demonstrate

to my child that I value him.”

“Maybe he’d rather you played with him.”

“When I find time. Guides are more qualified to implement instructional games.”

Connie linked in. Her lips twitched and her fingers flexed inside her glove.

Rory looked at me. “I need your help.”

“Bill can put you on my calendar.”

“Now.”

“This ceremony has cost me sixty minutes. Not that I’m complaining. Family relations are one of my priorities.”

“It’s important.”

Connie’s wraps grew transparent. She looked like she was biting on a stone.

“What have you done?” she asked Rory.

“I’m trying to reclaim my life.”

“Traipsing around without a guide? I called Security.”

“They’re coming?” Rory pulled out a black hand tool from under his shirt. It had a pistol grip and a Factory logo embossed on a flared barrel. Connie gasped.

Rory thumbed a setting on the tool and pointed it at Connie’s guide. He fired. A sharp pop sounded like a breaker being thrown. The leg pistons on Connie’s guide sagged. Its cameras winked out and it pitched forward onto the floor. I felt the thump through my shoes.

Rory sprang up. He shot two more guides and they collapsed. Screams filled the air. He aimed at Cowboy Bill.

“No.” I stepped in front of Bill.

“Come with me.”

“You need medication.”

“Now.” He pointed over my shoulder at Bill’s head.

“All right.”

Connie was bent over her guide, stabbing the reset button on its back but it lay like a lump of ore. She noticed Rory leading Bill and me out of the room and her teeth showed.

“You can’t hide,” she yelled. “They’ll track you down.”

Rory directed us down a hall and we ran. Bill’s rubber-soled feet clumped. Rory wheezed after five meters. He stopped before a service elevator and produced a Security card to open it.

The elevator took us down.

"What do you want from us?"

"From Bill, navigation; I ditched my guide too soon. And you've worked for Security. I, um, obtained a card but I need an account."

"Not a chance."

"You won't be punished after you explain that I threatened to fry your guide."

We emerged at a terminal. I felt odd; two of us and only one guide, but the other pedestrians were wrapped and leashed—oblivious. Rory took us through an *Authorized Personnel Only* door to a queue of official railcars and we climbed into one. Its four wide seats bulged with padding.

Rory jacked his stolen card into the forward console. He ordered the couplings detached and fed in a northern destination. The car launched. We edged past commuters and took priority at the junctions.

"Thief," I said. "Vandal."

"Quit blubbering." Rory studied the viewer. His left foot was tapping.

At the next junction, Security were stopping cars and my throat felt full of dirt. Would I be held liable after they captured us? Had Rory attacked anyone?

Rory stroked the controls and we shot past the stop. The car ascended at each ramp until we reached the topmost, swiftest rails.

Torn between my legal duty to call the authorities and my natural tendency to avoid confronting him, my finger wavered over the link pad.

He turned to me. "Security is unaccustomed to pursuit so I'll be free once I've escaped."

"Escaped what?"

"Drudgery. Toiling for labor-saving devices that somehow never grant us more recreation. Real recreation, not virtual diversions."

"Where do you think you're headed?"

"I've searched every site and almost gave up before I found Nunavuk. It's an aboriginal state with an ancient public link, modern medical and enviros, but you can cook a pot of beans or split logs if you please."

"Inside a stone hut?"

"Have you ever not known what your schedule was?"

"Sure. I ask Bill and it tells me."

"I mean having no schedule. Freedom."

"I have options."

"You can slave for one of a thousand similar corporations."

We had traveled beyond the main lines. Only a few dozen rails were visible and traffic was light. Hardwoods and conifers stood beneath us. I hadn't been this far north in years.

The railcar dipped sharply and my stomach flipped. Rory slammed his fist onto the console.

"We're being commandeered to a hospital. Give me an account."

I told him my password. He fingered the control pad but the car remained on its heading.

"This is for the best," I said.

"Shut up." He jabbed the pad hard enough to bend his finger.

The car lurched and sped up and I gripped a cushion. A red beacon shone from the console. "What have you done?"

"Override. Except I seem to have disabled the brakes."

"We'll crash. We're going to—"

"Please login," Bill said. "Security has an urgent message."

Rory slashed at the pad. The car jerked and gained altitude. "We're back on course, more or less," he said.

"I'll call for help," I said.

Rory ripped the wraps from my face and the gaskets popped like suction cups. My eyes teared, I shook all over, and I reached for his throat. The snarl died in my throat and I lowered my hands. What could I have been thinking?

He leaned over the console and scrolled through the car schematics. He popped open a repair bin and metal clanged as he rooted through the tools and held up a wrench driver.

"Somebody is going to have to leave the compartment, climb the maintenance ladder, and manually activate the brakes," he said.

"Will we coast to a safe stop?"

"It'll be like ramming into a mountain but the bags will protect us."

"What happens to whoever is on the ladder?"

"Bill is silicon."

"No."

"I'd rather die than let them adjust me." Rory called Bill over and showed it the schematics. "Wait until fifty meters before a junction tower." He handed Bill the driver, which had a cylindrical head like a revolver. Little lenses whirled as Bill's cameras focused on me.

I approved the orders. As Bill thumped past me I patted its side.

We strapped ourselves in as Bill jimmied the door. Freezing wind howled and my shirt collar flapped hard enough to sting. I hugged myself as much as the straps would allow.

The viewer showed alternating yellow and green strips that Rory said were corn and alfalfa. The rail stretched ahead, and I saw a thin, black spire. The pylon grew closer.

It was sudden as an explosion. Straps tore into my chest and limbs and the bow seemed to charge us. A bag blew up in my face and smothered me.

"Jack, are you okay?"

I saw flecks of light dancing on blackness. I opened my eyelids slowly, as if I had to peel them off my pupils. The bags had deflated and Rory was unbuckling me.

"Let's go."

Bill had set us down near the pylon. Rory punched a command, the gantry swung over, and we stepped across the grating to the pylon.

Bill's twisted leg pistons stuck out of a small crater in the rows of crops. I had to look away. A replacement would take years to customize and I felt naked.

"Maybe the Factory can salvage it," he said.

"Rory, you're sick." An emergency link was set in the wall. I touched the screen. "I've had enough."

"Relax." Rory's voice was a confident purr, like when we were teenagers and everyone wanted to be in his chat group. "I'm harmless and you don't want to condemn your own cousin."

"The courts will—"

"Convict me and you know it. I deserve an objective judgment."

"How?"

"Hike with me to Nunavuk. It'll only take a day. I'll explain my motives and you can turn me in at the border if you wish."

"I can't last twenty-four hours without a guide."

"Please."

We rode an elevator to ground level and stepped outside. My shoes sank in the earth and when I lifted my foot a fat earthworm wriggled.

"Disgusting," I said.

"They aerate the soil." He stroked a corn stalk, inhaled, and spread his arms as his chest expanded. "Glorious," he said.

We trudged in the shadow of the rail. Dirt got into my shoes and

packed against my toes and everything seemed to reek.

"It was disconcerting to quit." Rory's lips quivered as if he was trying to smile with a frozen face. "Remember those teleplays about selfless heroes striving to make their corporations notable? My fellow employees snapped up my tasks within minutes."

I reached for my wraps and my hand closed down on air. I stifled a curse.

"You've done that every minute," Rory said.

I stamped the muck. "How do you stand it without a guide?"

"We don't need them, they're just a habit, and now I'd feel peculiar with pistons groaning behind me."

"You are peculiar. I'd love to hand you to Security." I scratched my belly. "I'm ravenous. Do you suppose it's time to eat? I wish I knew what our calorie output was."

He tore an ear off a corn stalk and husked it. It looked white as bone with fiber strings between the kernels—not at all like what Bill used to serve. He bit down, made a face, and spat. "Can you start a fire?"

SUNDOWN MADE US HALT AND WE SQUATTED IN HARVESTED FURROWS. Rory chuckled at me fumbling with my shoes, aware that Bill usually helped me undress, and I listened to his ludicrous anarchist theories and my belly roar. It grew so dark that I couldn't see Rory—just a voice rising from the black mud.

"...Bushmen in an arid, snake-infested desert. All their work—food, shelter, and clothing—took them a total of fifteen hours per week. That's a slack day for one of us."

"Why are there so many flies?" I asked.

"To devour crop-damaging bugs."

A vibration traveled up my backside. We heard a crackle and an engine throb approaching.

"Over there," Rory said.

"Where? I can't see—"

It moved fast. A large shape crested a nearby hill. Flames spurted from it to scorch the low crops and produce a cloud of embers. It bore down on us.

"No!" I screamed. "Stop, I'm not the fugitive."

The monster didn't slow but I could now see that it was going to pass us by. Rory scampered over and stood in its path. The machine braked, almost on top of him. A sheet of fire played over the ground

and, after a few seconds, died. Soft lights on its trim glowed.

"Stand here so the autopilot can't drive on," he said.

Rory went around to the side, stepped up on a running board, and jacked his card into the cockpit. A screen colored his face purple.

Rory clapped his hands. "Should be easy to divert."

"What is it?"

"A cultivator, burn weeds, scorches the corn too but they rebound faster. May not be comfy inside."

"It must be better than here."

We were cheek to jowl in the compartment. My head bumped a hard plastic roof and I smelled Rory's stale breath as his monologue kept me from sleep.

"Submissiveness to our employers cost us the ability to think," he said.

"I use my brain."

"Jack, you're a machine-monitored commodity."

"I won't apologize for being content. My life is wonderful."

WE REACHED THE BORDER THE NEXT MORNING. FOREST HAD swallowed up the farmland and a customs station lay in a clearing at the base of a rail pylon. On the Nunavuk side I spotted a cabin with a rain-warped, wooden verandah running along its side. No smoke rose from its chimney.

Rory studied the pylon and the security railcars docked at the junction. He pointed to a flicker of reflected sunlight in the sky. "Skycams," he said. "I'll have to sneak past."

"Please reconsider. You'd be happier with treatment."

He laughed hard and seized me in a hug. "I'll call when I'm settled. Tell everyone so more can join me." He turned and marched into the woods, spine straight and shoulders back.

I steered the cultivator up to the border station and three Security men watched me park. They wore spy eyes—half wraps that looked like platinum monocles—and their guides had stun prods clipped to their torsos.

I climbed out with my hands in clear view.

"I'm Jack Emerson. Were you able to salvage my guide?"

"The memory is intact," a man with *Sergeant* embossed on his shoulder said.

"Thank goodness." I couldn't stop rubbing my hands. "I can tell you where Rory plans to cross."

"No need. Our cams are tracking him."

"He's a decent fellow."

"His mental health is our primary concern."

A Factory woman emerged from the station door and my heart pounded. Slaved to her guide was a near duplicate of Cowboy Bill, with smoother chamfers to give its features a streamlined look. Its cameras didn't shift to track me. She opened a panel in the new Bill's back.

"What are you going to do to Rory?" I asked the sergeant.

"As long as he's in no danger, we'll let him seek."

I heard a hiss of hydraulics and turned to see its first step. Bill's face was aglow as it stretched out an arm to hand me wraps, glove, and plugs.

I linked in. The display was crisp, and I snapped into the company directory as the knot in my shoulders loosened and my muscles went slack. I felt Cowboy Bill's hands steady me and realized that I might have toppled over.

FOUR FISCAL QUARTERS LATER, CONNIE AND I MET FOR LUNCH, the table set for three, and she smiled her big smile. "They gave Rory his old job back," she said. "Try not to stare when you see him, he's gaunt, and there's something else, his guide, it—"

"Cousins," Rory called.

I turned and my grin died. He was wrapped and leashed to Cowboy Bill, or rather the original shell that once held my Bill, with a sloppily mended gash over its chest and mismatched leg pistons.

Something very much like jealousy made me raise my voice. "Why?"

Connie cut in and filled the air with gossip. She told us a painfully detailed anecdote of office politics, how she squished a rival, and Rory watched her, eyes attentive, with no mocking or challenge in his responses.

Connie finished her story. "Needless to say, Singh turns tail whenever she sees me coming. Oh, they've loaded the buffet." She patted Rory's hand. "I'll scout it out."

She left and I stared at the first Bill's scar. If it had been human, the pylon would have punctured it dead center where the lungs nestle round the heart.

"They abandoned Nunavuk ages ago," Rory said. "I scoured the ruins and found a quill pen and a piece of an acoustic guitar. Security

ignored me once I'd freed you so I crisscrossed the globe by rail, searched everywhere for a community beyond the link, and never found it. Everyone has a guide." His eyes were dark pits. "I was so alone, Jack. I had to come back."

"Why did you salvage Bill's shell?"

"They wanted to issue me a new one but I convinced them to provide the guts and I assembled it myself. Very cathartic. Do you think me bizarre?"

"It doesn't matter, so long as you act normal again."

He smiled. "Precisely."

I linked, and when I came back, Connie and Rory stood at the buffet ladling soup. I couldn't resist committing a dreadful social faux pas and slipped Rory's wraps on to access the old Bill.

I removed the wraps, shaking, and Connie didn't seem to notice as I choked back lunch and made small talk.

After she left, I told Rory, "I should report you."

"No law requires your guide to have memory or links."

"That *thing* is a desecration. It's nothing but a walking phone." I smacked his wraps, recklessly, but they were mere decorations with no vision circuits to damage.

"I'm free to go where I please. I do the guiding."

"You're a fraud," I accused. "You're just using Cowboy Bill to fit in."

He stood and gave his Bill a slap on the shoulder. "Saddle up." 🍁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Prize

Elizabeth Westbrook

OLD EYES PAUSED WITH A GRASSHOPPER still twitching on her tongue. Someone nearby made tremors. She felt them, in the ground, in the grass, in the barely moving breeze. She flattened to the warm earth, crushed grass prickling her bare belly. She squinted through the grass tops, yellow mist against blue sky.

Big Meat loomed, a sudden silhouette against the sky. His eyes, like blue chips in his red face, were eager yet wary as they searched from side to side. A good hunter, strong, quiet, but Old Eyes had felt him coming.

And, for all his skill, he'd have plowed past Prize if she hadn't startled up like a doe. She looked small before him, all brown eyes and slender limbs, arms crossing her belly. A tremor rippled through Big Meat. Old Eyes saw it. He slowly lifted a dead rabbit he'd had hidden by his side. He dangled it before Prize.

Old Eyes quelled her urge to leap up, shouting him off. Wasn't it a rich gift? The only mark on it was the bloody furrow the cord had cut in its neck. He hadn't even eaten the liver first. He could have

offered much less. He was large, healthy, full of his many catches and his mother's crops, cleverly hidden patches of food that she grew in the prairie wool. Big Meat was a good breeder for any burrow-dwelling girl. And what was Prize? Child to the outsider, Old Eyes.

A rich gift. That said he wanted Prize badly, as did the rising intentions of his body that the thigh-high grass failed to conceal. Old Eyes resented him all the more for that.

Prize herself just stared round-eyed at the rabbit. She was as unused to fresh meat as she was to admiration, and all too used to hunger. For too long she'd been "Little Surprise," crawling unexpectedly alive into the spring sunshine at each winter's end like a frail white worm. Nobody had brought her rabbits then.

Big Meat held the rabbit so close to Prize that the dead fur brushed her breasts. "Take rabbit," he said, his voice cracking like a newly grown male's. "Take Big Meat."

Prize glanced up sharply, as if noticing for the first time the man attached to the rabbit. Her look of surprise softened to a smile. Flattered, she covered her mouth with her hands, revealing her belly, ready for ripening. Big Meat's chest rose with a sharp intake of breath. As indeed it should.

That spring Little Surprise had risen like a butterfly out of the burrow with body newly sprouted and thatched, with rounded hips, and with high breasts as smooth and surprising a treasure as a pair of pheasant's eggs found in the grass. She glowed with a kind of power. Now the burrow-dwellers called her simply "Prize."

Old Eyes watched the ritual unfold. She should have seen this coming. She and Prize had been tripping over Big Meat since the spring rising. He'd stalk by as near as Old Eyes would let him, dangling a kill or hoisting an especially fine stock of roots for winter storage, making a show of the weight. He'd even taken to decorating himself, thrusting feathers through his hair or, once, killing a weasel and dangling it from a thong around his waist. Tempting the Evil with a wanton show of luxury and waste.

Old Eyes had noticed him and not noticed him. The summer season was short enough. Little time to grow fat, to gather, save and store enough food to last the winter all the while keeping instincts alert for the Evil. Too focused on survival, as she had been all the child's growing years, she had been oblivious to Big Meat's attentions to Prize. Now, however, the summer was ending, the light lengthening and turning gold earlier each day. The Evil had not hunted the

people all season, nor had there been any natural deaths. The burrow dwellers had drawn close to each other, feeling safe enough to risk gatherings, talk, even songs.

Foolishness, Old Eyes knew, tempting the malicious power of the Evil. She had lived long enough to see how it lurked, waiting for just such carelessness. The past was hard to remember, a painful blur. But she knew to stay out on the margins of the tunnels the people dug within the hard walls that stood strangely square beneath the earth. Let them cluster if they would. Survival meant staying apart.

Old Eyes rose out of the grass. Grasshoppers whirled up around her, shiny bits of sunshine.

Big Meat started and his grin drooped.

"Old Eyes," he stuttered. "Not see you."

"Looked elsewhere, Big Meat," she said. He swallowed and averted his eyes from her face. Her look always frightened them, kept them distant from her and Little Surprise, Prize now. The large man hunched his shoulders, his face sullen as he began to turn away.

"Wait." Prize clutched Big Meat's rabbit to her breasts and stared fiercely at Old Eyes. Big Meat froze, head lifted in sudden hope. As the two women locked gazes, old to young, tears began to well in Prize's eyes and her head trembled with the effort of repressing them, but she held. She turned her head to Big Meat, without taking her eyes off Old Eyes.

"Take rabbit?" she said. She held it out to Big Meat, and then she did turn her eyes to him. Big Meat looked at the glossy plump treasure. He swallowed.

"Keep rabbit, Little Prize," he said. He smiled, one side of his mouth only. "Get fat for winter. Be Big Prize." He raised his eyes to hers and his whole mouth caught the grin. Prize glowed, ducked her head, laughed a breathy, fast gasp of a chuckle.

Alarm surged through Old Eyes. Such danger in those smiles, those laughs, that glow passing between them, from Prize to Big Meat back to Prize. The Evil.

"Prize not for you, Big Meat," she said. They started like game in a noose. "Get! Go!" she shouted. She waved him away, shoos him like flies or thieving gophers

"Old Eyes!" Prize protested, but she ignored the girl, eyes on Big Meat until he turned and strode away. Grasshoppers whirled up around him like shrapnel.

A memory stabbed Old Eyes, caught her just below the left breast.

She fell to her knees, gasping at its power. Prize knelt with her, holding her up by the arms, crying out to her.

"Be still, child," she gasped. "The Evil seeks you. Be still."

With the instinctive reflex of a lifetime's training, Prize went limp, blank. In an instant she became an animal, a butterfly, a blade of grass, a breath of wind. No thought, no being, no consciousness, she blended into the prairie. Yet underneath the practiced stillness, Old Eyes felt something simmer in the girl. It was power wakening, readying itself, awaiting instruction.

More memory seeped up from a dark place where it had hidden. Prize's eyes narrowed and her consciousness rose again to the surface.

"What?" she said.

"Hush," Old Eyes cautioned.

"I do not feel the Evil," Prize replied. Old Eyes wrapped her arms around Prize, pressing her face to the child's soft bare shoulder, shutting out the look of suspicion, breathing in the meadow smell of her skin. She had not done this in a while. Prize's skin had a musky sharpness to it now that was not there before she bloomed. Keep out the memories. Keep Prize young. Safe.

"I do not feel the evil," Prize repeated. "It is not coming."

"It is," Old Eyes said.

"No," said Prize. "You said that to send away Big Meat. To stop me thinking about Big Meat." She pushed Old Eyes, forcing her to teeter back on her heels. Her eyes were bright with power now, strong, adult in a face still soft with youth.

"Oh, it is coming," Old Eyes said.

"You keep apart from the others," Little Prize complained. "You keep me apart."

"For safety," Old Eyes said.

"I want to be with them," cried Prize. "I want to talk. Sing." Old Eyes cut her off with a slash of her hand.

"Singing is the worst," she snapped. "Stories, laughing. Remembering! They bring the Evil."

"I do not feel the Evil coming," said Prize. "When it is coming, I feel it. I want to be with them. It's safe."

"You want to mate with Big Meat," Old Eyes sneered. They sat still, the grass loosely woven walls of gold around them. So quiet, a meadowlark burred.

"Yes," Prize said at last. "I want that." She gestured with one arm

in the direction Big Meat had gone, back to his mother, back to the main cluster of burrow dwellers. "I want all of that."

Old Eyes turned from her. Deliberately ignoring her, she picked grasshoppers. The thought of chewing live insects disgusted her, no matter how nourishing they were. She shifted instead to the saskatoon bushes to browse on the dark purple berries. For a time Prize ate near her, not speaking any more than she. Old Eyes, stomach full, heart exhausted, slept.

She awoke from a nightmare of screaming missiles and fire, of running through rubble of broken streets and burning apartment blocks. She ran with hundreds, thousands of others. The people made strangely formal silhouettes against the orange flames because their heads were barbered and they were clothed and arrayed with accessories. They carried possessions clutched up in moments of panic: quilts, compute paks, children. Old Eyes, not yet called Old Eyes but the undescriptive name, Dr. Panjari, ran with everyone else. She carried Prize pressed against her breast. Not the Prize of now, but another Prize, a multitude of unnamed Prizes in a sterile, vacuum-sealed container, kept at absolute zero. Likely the last in the world, these were the answer to Peacekeeper, a creature made to enforce peace on humanity, a creature whose ironic, *reductio ad absurdum* conclusions were now reducing humanity's accomplishments to scrap.

Peacekeeper sought her through the web of their shared consciousness, fingering the strands of the many untutored, noisy minds around them. As the great, engineered psyche drew close, Dr. Panjari became terrified, her mind reduced to random images. The streaming, screaming people around her made her think of ants, boiling from their stirred up nest. They *were* ants, black leggy strings, kaleidoscope fragments shattering over concrete hills churned up under falling bombs, and she was an ant also. And the mind of the Peacekeeper passed over her.

After the first, disbelieving jubilation, she had understood. This had been her first step in the long, laborious journey of understanding. She had continued to be an ant. To be a flame licking out of a store front. Water from a burst main rippling along its own unconscious path.

She awoke, being sunshine, being a branch heavy with saskatoon berries, being prey mindless of all but survival. Yet also, being Dr. Panjari full of knowledge, ready to give it to the ripened clone.

Except that Old Eyes, who loved Prize, was not ready.

Prize sat near her, damp with sweat, languorous. Old Eyes and Panjari, both, knew where she had been while Old Eyes slept. They knew what had happened, and Prize saw that they knew.

"They can't feel the Evil coming," Prize said. "He can't." Her sleepy eyes and swollen lips were defiant.

"No," said Old Eyes. "I can, and you can, but they can't."

"Why?"

"In my case, training," said Dr. Panjari.

"I do not have that," said Prize.

"No," Panjari answered. "In your case, it is genetic." When Prize frowned in puzzlement over the unknown word, Panjari repeated, "You are not trained."

Prize said, "Doesn't matter. That's what I give him. I tell them when the Evil is hunting. I teach them all to be burrow rats. The Evil won't see them."

"You could do that," said Dr. Panjari.

"You could do," Prize accused. "Why not?"

"I did," Panjari said, or was it Old Eyes? "For many years I do, for those that will listen. That's why they call me Old Eyes, because I see what's not there to them." She rubbed her eyes. Her head ached. "That's why there are so many of them, and why they think it's safe to tell stories and sing."

Prize asked, "You warn them? Then why does the Evil still come? Why do some still burn up?"

Panjari said, "They make too much noise, singing, telling stories, remembering."

"Warn them!" Prize cried.

"I warn them," said Old Eyes, "Don't I thump the ground?"

Prize nodded. "You thump the ground. That a warning?"

"Yes. But some forget how to become nothing quickly enough." Panjari added, "The Peacemaker finds them by their human aspiration." Prize frowned again, shrugged, got on with what she understood.

"I warn them sooner. I feel the Evil sooner than you." She smiled slyly at Panjari. "You not know that."

Dr. Panjari knew, but said nothing.

Prize thought awhile, absently batting away flies drinking sweat from the hollow in her collar bone.

"The piece of what?" she said.

Old Eyes/Panjari thought, "Oh no" and "Here we go." The nugget of knowledge she had built up over so many years lay heavy in her brain, awaiting delivery.

The branches above them swished apart and Big Meat's red face grinned down at them. Panjari instinctively covered her breasts and pubis. Prize leapt up and onto Big Meat, wrapping arms and legs around him.

"You tell?" he whispered.

"She know. She Old Eyes," Prize whispered back. Big Meat's eyes rolled in Panjari's direction and she saw he was nervous. She saw also how his arms tightened around Prize's waist, how his cheek pressed into the tangle of her wild dark hair. *Mine*, his stance told her. *Happy*, Prize's body replied. Their pleasure in each other was animal and earthy, but it reached into the place where Peacekeeper could find them. It reached there.

And still, Panjari didn't insist on passing on the knowledge she had held so long, hidden in the depths of her mind, out of Peacekeeper's sight.

Wearily beyond describing, Old Eyes/Panjari waved them away. Prize slipped down Big Meat's ready body and they joyfully crashed away deeper into the bushes. She heard Big Meat sing, a chant inaudible but for the word "Prize" sprinkled frequently through it. Poetry, yet, Panjari sighed. She kept watch for the Evil. Peacemaker. Whatever. And she thought.

They were so happy. They could grow old, breed in some numbers, Prize passing on the ability to hide in primitive safety from the seeking eye of the Peacekeeper and its succeeding clones. Perhaps, perhaps in time they would find a way to build, or Peacekeeper would miscalculate and leave no clones as heirs, or a genetic shift might occur to soften its resolve. Would that be so wrong? A happy Eden hidden from the eye of the serpent or was it from the angel's flaming sword?

That's not what Prize had been made to do. Not what Panjari had spent lifetimes hiding and working to achieve. Prize was humanity's champion, the one to defeat the first champion. Panjari, one Panjari from long ago, had helped create the perfect Peacekeeper, whose peculiar logic had led it to take away the responsibility of civilization from mankind, as a sharp tool from a toddler. To immolate any naughty human who aspired to reach beyond his basic animal nature.

Prize was Peacekeeper's equal in every way, a zygote Panjari had preserved, one of many, identical to the Peacekeeper. Except:

Peacekeeper guarded mankind from itself.

Prize loved humans as one of them.

Peacekeeper was the world's protector.

Prize was humankind's warrior.

Peacekeeper knew duty and logic.

Prize was a girl in love, a woman who wanted babies, peace and tranquility.

Prize was Peacekeeper's equal in every way, genetically. The knowledge of how to use her genetic gifts—that Panjari had to give her.

Panjari thought of a world where people could think again, tinker again, make artifacts, and dream and create again.

Old Eyes thought of Big Meat and Prize, happy in each other's arms.

Panjari bore the knowledge of how to battle Peacekeeper, all Peacekeeper's ways and weaknesses. It could pass from Panjari's mind to Prize with the ease of a kiss. That was how she'd designed it, over all the years of secret struggle. A kiss to rebuild the world.

And shatter another, thought Old Eyes. And for what?

Panjari felt a flicker in the webwork where minds could wander, if they knew how, or learn. Peacemaker was at work somewhere, wiping out human aspiration.

In the bush, Prize's voice rose in a jubilant shout of amazed joy.

The tired old woman rose and wiped her hands on her thighs. 🍁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Devil, Devil

Edward Hoornaert

DEVIL, DEVIL. I USED TO BE A DEVIL. THAT WAS
my job, my calling, my pride.

Of course, no one thought of me as a devil, but as a Voice. I'm the only one—my secret!—who knows the difference. Devil, not Voice.

Why am I no longer one of the chosen few, the heroic time travelers, the Voices? Because of a woman. Oldest story in the world. Adam and Eve. Samson and Delilah.

Me and Laila.

Oh, Laila. My beloved Laila, who doesn't even know I exist.

"HELLO. MY NAME IS LAILA."

I glance around, but the young woman is indeed talking to *me*. Her blonde hair curls in the latest style, artistically tinged with golden sparkles. She's beautiful and sweet and almost blushing in her shyness.

"Laila Gwayden." She holds out her hand. Her palm is moist. Her fingers tremble.

My name is Devil. But I don't tell her that.

Around us, people mingle in threes and fours on the church lawn,

holding disposable plates as they nibble at their Last Supper. Behind Laila, the white cone of Mount Baker on the mainland floats like a halo around her head.

I know, I know—an illusion. The lower mountains at the volcano's base are hidden by haze and the earth's curvature, creating the illusion of floating mountain and angelic halo. But I have lived my life, amphibian-like, in dual worlds of reason and marvel without one ever seeming to negate the other; and if God can make mountains float, whatever the scientific explanation, what other miracles might He perform?

Such as having the most beautiful woman at the Last Supper picnic introduce herself to *me*.

THE GIST OF THE SERVICE THAT PRECEDED THE PICNIC WAS THAT, thanks to Archangel Albertyne, Jesus imbibed nanotechnological life-support gadgets, not bread and wine. And that's what made him come back to life.

Doubt you believe this. Most people don't. Me neither, now—and don't know I ever did, really. After all, Voices are just that: voices in people's heads. Ventriloquists. You can't take anything back in time with you. Not even nans, tiny as they are.

I still believe in God, but not religion. The church people treated me so nicely, though, that I pretended to myself that I believed.

Or do I now disbelieve because I'm afraid I'll go to Hell?

Am I already there?

They won't let me in church anymore. I let Them down, They said, when I revisited the church lawn, withered and brown. They acted like I couldn't hear. Having a Voice in the congregation had brought prestige and credibility to the fledgling Church of Nanotechnology. When I lost my Voice, I let Them down.

Beyond the dead winter grass, Mount Baker was hidden behind endless gray storm clouds.

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S A VOICE?" NERVOUS LAILA, POTATO salad trembling, terrified by her hubris, yet utterly determined. She'd researched me, I think. Learned I was a member of the church, figured I could be found at the Last Supper service.

Found? Or lost?

I was a Voice close to losing myself. Every time you travel back in time to some poor soul's body—don't like to call them dummies,

but it's a habit—you lose a bit of who you are. Not physically; the sense of who you are. You can go crazy, unless you're strong.

Unnaturally strong. Like Yuri Elkanah. If he phased into a woman, especially in a repressed and prudish society such as our own, he'd get her into a humiliating situation before he returned. A mild stunt was to strip her naked in the middle of a street. Then he'd laugh like hell about what the poor dummy must feel when she snapped back to herself. Too much granite in Elkanah's heart to doubt who he was. A great Voice.

Rule number one: the end justifies the means. Use people who are mentally ill, who hear voices, who are susceptible to albertyne-ct waves. Use them, because your research is more important than their distress. Use them.

But dummies know. They know something has happened to them, that they've been used like toilet paper. They know, and plunge more deeply, hopelessly, into their madness.

Doesn't matter. What matters is that history is a bona fide science. Finally, we can truly learn from the past.

Devils. Told you. Not time-travel scientists. Devils possessing wretched, innocent souls. Without a glimmer of contrition, because we serve such a worthy cause.

"PROKOFIEV," LAILA SAID, "WOULD HAVE MADE A GOOD VOICE."

Her potato salad was steady now, her blue eyes glowed. Zeal had conquered nerves.

"He had that inner strength, inner certainty that the greatest Voices have."

Like Elkanah? But of course she didn't know Elkanah.

Laila was working on her Masters degree in music; her thesis was about Prokofiev. You know—the composer. *Peter and the Wolf*, etc. Left Russia during the revolution (smart man), returned just in time for Stalin's mad murderous purges in the 1930s (stupid, stupid, stupid man). Persecuted by Stalin, like so many, and died the same day as Stalin. Just hours apart.

I listen to Prokofiev a lot, inside my own head. Listen to music he would have written, if he could.

I'm not a Voice anymore. I'm a listener. A listener ... and a Hoper. Yes, I like that. I'm one who hopes.

"WOULD YOU CARE TO GO SOMEWHERE MORE PRIVATE?" LAILA

asks. She puts her potato salad, scarcely touched, on the church's picnic table and brushes her fingertips daintily across a napkin.

We go to a quiet café and discuss Prokofiev. He's more than her Master's thesis; he's her passion, her obsession. I've heard his symphonies, of course—everyone has, the greatest since Beethoven, maybe the greatest ever—but I just want to be with her.

That evening, we're on the couch at my barren, eighth-floor flat with an expensive view overlooking the oceanfront and Mount Baker. We kiss.

But when I touch her breasts, nervousness returns. Why?

"I'm a virgin."

I pull away, surprised and ashamed.

I'M OUTSIDE SOMEWHERE; A STREET, MAYBE. HOLDING MY HAND outstretched, for some reason. Doesn't matter why. Very little matters anymore. Wind whispers through my spread fingertips.

But it isn't just wind. It's the past.

That air molecule there spent time in the lungs of a tyrannosaurus. And that one near my thumb was breathed by a Neanderthal in a smoky cave as he brutally deflowered a nervous young virgin.

And this one, the one I try to trap in my fist, this one—yes!—it was in the room when Prokofiev died!

The molecule eludes me. Defeated, I lower my upraised palm to my lap. A tear falls in slow motion, splattering onto my lifeline like a bomb.

"I WANT YOU TO FREELANCE FOR ME."

It was the next evening. Laila and I had eaten dinner, then sat on my couch and kissed as we watched Mount Baker turn passion-red. She hadn't been nervous this time when I touched her breasts.

Strictly because she wanted me to freelance?

"Don't look at me like that," she said fiercely. She added, as though it explained everything, "It's about Prokofiev. That's why I need you to freelance."

Freelancing was a perk of the job. Most research, of course, was done for the consortium of universities that maintained the massive tracking facilities and computers that sent out the temp probes to find appropriate dummies for us. But they let us do jobs on the side.

Why? Not pity, though it should have been. The implants destroy all hope of being normal. You suffer constant, irreversible noise,

tingling and pain. You risk death in a dozen different ways. And madness.

Without perks, who in their right mind would become a Voice? They wanted us to think we were gods of the time waves—but we were devils of the time waves. Perky little devils.

“I CAN’T PAY,” LAILA SAID, “BUT I’LL ... I’LL HAVE SEX WITH YOU when you’re done.”

Wrong ... sex should be done out of love. I started to say this, but her hand moved lower on my body and I forgot how to speak.

There were laws about time travel. Aside from the natural laws, I mean, such as you can’t be two places at one time or can’t phase to a previous time to change anything you yourself did. I’m talking about human laws. Number one is *thou shalt not change history, only observe it*. But Laila assured me she only wanted me to observe.

I no longer freelanced. Scared to. Too close to cracking. Too much unreality, psychological uncertainty. I just wanted to be me. Whoever *me* was.

Devil, devil. I used to be a devil. That was my job, my calling, my—
Didn’t I already say that?

“WILL YOU FREELANCE FOR ME?”

Heart pounding, universe spiraling madly inside me, I opened my eyes and gazed adoringly at Laila. Finished with her inexperienced yet effective manipulations of my body, she wiped her fingertips on my handkerchief. Just as she’d done after the potato salad.

“Please?”

Use the poor dummy. Doesn’t matter. The end justifies the means, right?

Madness. But I agreed, in a voice that cracked.

VOICES WHO CRACKED WERE TREATED LIKE THE SACRED COWS IN ancient India. Allowed to wander anywhere in the vast Albertyne Complex—anywhere on Saltspring Island, in fact. Not on ferries or copters, though; the outside world was too harsh.

Mindlessly they wandered, fading in and out of pseudo-lucidity at the whim of some capricious god. Babylonians spouting towering nonsense. Fed when hungry, clothed when naked, cleaned when filthy, treated with compassion and condescension, because none of us knew who’d be the next Voice to crack.

Beyond simple compassion lay the fact that madness and acclimatization to albertyne waves made Cracked Voices perfect dummies for future time travelers. Walking beacons screaming to temp probes, *Here's a ripe sucker!*

We wondered if these husks were being used. After all, who could be more fascinating to future time travelers than the intrepid pioneers of time travel? And so, wondering—hoping?—we felt pity and awe when we met a Cracked Voice. And we preened a bit. Just in case.

Moo. I said moo, damn it.

Why don't you answer?

THE FIRST TIME I SAW PROKOFIEV WAS INNOCENT ENOUGH. Odessa, 1927. His first concert tour in the Soviet Union since he'd left following the revolution; he didn't move back until 1936. With Laila's help, I'd learned everything about him. Databanks, pills and implants made it easy. The dummy's language came naturally; you possessed it the same as you possessed hands and feet, liver and spleen.

The machinery impressed Laila. Scared her. That was one of the few times I felt in charge, leading her around the mile-long, ten-story maze of electronics that pinpointed the dummy most suitable to the mission at hand. Doing the work of God takes a lot of computer power.

We Voices did the phasing ourselves, of course. No magic or ESP involved, just years of training, a rare talent, and .38 kilograms of nans tucked here, there and everywhere in our bodies, humming and buzzing and hurting. I had a robot lead Laila away before I phased. When I Voiced I looked as sexy as an exceptionally stupid sack of potatoes.

I phased into a waitress who stumbled and broke a tray of glasses at the moment of possession. Laughter, cruel. Some things never changed, no matter when. I cut her thumb picking up broken glass.

There were a lot of people. A banquet in Prokofiev's honor. These people, I remember thinking, took their music seriously.

I looked for a prematurely bald man with big lips. The white nigger, enemies called him, because of those lips.

There. Prokofiev himself. The greatest composer of the twentieth century, one of the greatest ever. He sat at the head table, arguing loudly with his wife, an opera singer. He treated her like dirt. I thought about my relationship with Laila, and felt smug.

A young violinist started playing Prokofiev's music. Just a kid. Prokofiev's face grew dark. He stormed up to the kid and humiliated him in front of everyone by telling him how to play the music.

I felt sorry for the kid and asked a waiter his name. Oistrakh.

Laila screamed and kissed me when I told her that. She'd heard of Oistrakh. In her own way, she was as obsessed with music as the hard, uncaring Prokofiev.

Laila was right. He'd have made a good Voice. A good devil.

DEVIL, DEVIL. THAT WAS ME.

Laila went with me to the Rockies for a weekend. After that, I was hopelessly in love.

And doomed. Naked on Sunday, she raised her lips from my groin and announced she wasn't satisfied with my Odessa report. She wanted more.

She wanted me to break the law.

I wanted, with a desperation that went beyond thought, for her to finish what she'd begun.

I agreed.

NO FUTURE VOICE HAS EVER POSSESSED ME EVEN THOUGH I'M A prime candidate. I know, because I'm a listener, listening for Voices in my head. I hear nothing.

Except Prokofiev's music. Music he never wrote.

That makes me happy. Hopeful.

LAILA WANTED ME TO CHANGE HISTORY. ILLEGAL, I TOLD HER after I'd had time to think above the waist. Dangerous. Stupid.

"You agreed." Tears welled in her eyes.

Yes, I'd agreed. And my protests were tokens. If she'd asked me to strip naked in the middle of busy Banff Avenue, which we were crossing as we talked, I'd have done it. For her.

"Just give Prokofiev a message. That's all."

That's *all*? That's a rehabbing offense!

"Tell him to avoid Bolshevik-something-or-other Avenue," handing me a piece of paper, "on June 15, 1963." He was hit by a bus on that date, a penniless, broken wretch who'd been stripped of fame, money, glory. Stripped by Stalin, who was jealous of anyone famous and respected and not controlled by Stalin.

Was it on Banff Avenue that Prokofiev died? No, that's something

else...

I don't want to think about this anymore.

WET. TEETH CHATTERING. WHY AM I AT THIS ROCKY BEACH?

I remember. I was looking for Mount Baker—wanted to sing Prokofiev's music to it. That's why I'm standing in frigid, fish-smelling salt waves, turning round and round, searching the empty horizon.

Am I looking the wrong direction? How can a person lose a whole mountain? Has it vanished?

I've lost Mount Baker.

LAILA WANTED ME TO BREAK THE LAW BECAUSE OF PROKOFIEV'S Tenth Symphony. Dying from cancer, he started it on paper pulled from garbage cans, drawing ledger lines without a ruler. It was written in his own blood, because that was all he had left. But before he finished the symphony, he died under the wheels of a bus on Banff Avenue.

No. Somewhere else...

Laila had studied the fragments for her thesis. They were greater even than his mighty Eighth and Ninth Symphonies. For the sake of the world, for the sake of music, for her own sake, she wanted it finished. Wanted me to warn him so he'd live a few more months, long enough to finish the symphony. A few months wasn't a big change to history. Not dangerous.

I agreed. Stupid, stupid, stupid man.

I SAW MY SISTER YESTERDAY. THINK IT WAS YESTERDAY. I WAS OVER at ... somewhere. A big room with massive windows. Good, comforting, to see her.

If a Voice changed history, I asked my sister, would it slowly heal itself, snap back to its natural shape like a snake's belly after a frog passed through—with only details (deceptive, agonizing word) changed? Or would civilization be utterly changed and devastated?

Children playing with God's shotguns.

My sister didn't answer. No one ever answers.

She took off the jacket I was wearing—it fell apart, actually, when she tugged—and put a new one on me. Bright blue, with a rain hood. No heatronics in it. I liked that. Hard to remember how to control the heatronics.

My sister started crying. I tried to comfort her. Big brothers do that sort of thing; even I remember that. But she didn't understand me. Or hear me. Or both.

After she left—I didn't notice her go, or I'd have said good-bye—I was struck by how old she'd gotten. And the young man with her wasn't her husband. It was her baby boy. And you know what that means.

Exactly. It means all this stuff with Laila and Prokofiev happened years ago. Years and years.

That's a very hopeful sign. Don't you think?

RAW AIR, KILLING COLD, TOO MUCH FOR MY DUMMY'S TATTERED coat. Gloves were missing a couple of fingers, and I felt a wispy tendrill of worry about that. He'd been a violinist, I knew in the dream-like way of these things, and he was worried about his fingers freezing.

Cold as Hell. Appropriate.

No, not here. Not now. Moscow, 1953. See? I remember.

Prokofiev was an old man, weak from illness and, probably, from doctors using leaches on him. He had a new wife, a writer. Mira looked much younger than he did. As I saw her helping him up the steps of an apartment building, I was struck by something.

When I'd seen him a month earlier—more than a quarter century for him—I'd felt smug about my relationship with Laila. Not so, now. Mira Mendelson-Prokofieva, a Jewess, held his arm with such gentleness. And he, hers. No fighting. No arguing. They looked comfortable together.

I was envious.

But not very. I knew what would soon happen. Stalin, restless, had recently started a major purge by imprisoning the country's best doctors. Especially the Jews. The purge would soon spread to Soviet arts. And especially music.

Poor Sergei Sergeevich. Poor Mira Mendelson-Prokofieva.

Poor me.

POOR PROKOFIEV, POOR POOR LAILA, POOR POOR POOR ME, ALL of us villains and victims, around and around and around, now without even the mercy of time as a final period at the end of our life sentences of folly, folly, fol—

Where... Where was I?

No, when was I?

Who was I?

Oh. Yes. I was a dummy with 1953-vintage ice on his nose and mustache, approaching the great Prokofiev in front of his apartment on Art Theater Lane. Mira looked at me fearfully. Policeman? Informant? KGB?

No, I voiced through the dummy, just a poor violinist down on his luck. Wanting nothing more than to help the great man inside and maybe get warm in the process.

Mira was suspicious. Prokofiev, though, seemed glad to have someone take a burden off her hands.

Wish Laila looked at me the way Mira looked at Prokofiev.

VIVID. SO VIVID...

"Vodka?" Prokofiev asked. We were in his study. Alone. Mira was in the parlor, talking to a woman about cleaning their country house for the coming spring.

Now what? If I gave him Laila's message, I was a criminal. And would he believe me? Would he even hear me?

I temporized. Funny word, for a time-traveller. Temporized. Tempo rise. Duh. "How are you, Sergei Sergeevich?"

He looked at me for a long time. The Stalin terrors weren't, the databanks had told me, a time when you trusted strangers. Or even friends. Prokofiev had been burned before. His music had been attacked. His first wife, the long-suffering opera singer, was in Siberia.

Yet he answered me, using breath that seemed as though it might be his last. "My soul hurts."

Yes. Oh, God, yes. My soul hurts.

I bowed, honoring him. "Sergei Sergeevich, do you know this tune?" I hummed a few bars that Laila had taught me after the temprobes had supplied the date I'd be phasing to.

"How do you know that?" When I didn't answer, he hobbled a step closer to me. "I thought of it just yesterday. I haven't even written it down yet."

"I'm from..." I paused, trying to remember. "The future."

Would he believe me? Or think I'm mad? Why should he be different than everyone else?

He just stared at me.

"That music," I said, "is extremely well known a century from now. So are your great Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, which you'll com-

pose in a few years.”

I expected laughter, but he caught on, and believed, incredibly quickly. His haggard face began to glow at this praise of music he hadn't written yet. Something still remained of the egotistical, obsessed firebrand I'd seen in Odessa.

I began to talk.

MY SOUL HURTS. OH YES, IT HURTS. MOO.

The humming and ringing of the implants has, over the years, turned into music. Ceaseless music. Each note brings pain—but gentle pain, so gentle it's almost pleasurable.

Much better than when there was no music.

“YOUR GREATEST WORKS BY FAR ARE GOING TO BE BORN OUT OF the intense misery of your last years.” I hadn't intended to tell him this. Only about avoiding Banff Avenue.

Prokofiev held his brow in either pain or distress. Or both. But he believed me. Maybe it was his genius at work. The imagination and vision to grasp the impossible.

“Suffering, you say. What suffering?”

“Nothing you can't handle.” Is that a gloat in my voice? Do I want him to suffer because I'm jealous?

“Is it my health? Or ... the Great Gardener?”

“Gardener?”

He smiled. A mocking grimace. “Yes, you're from the future.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I mean Stalin.”

I took a deep breath, then coughed. My dummy wasn't a well man. “Stalin.”

He was silent a long time, holding his head. Then he whispered something. I strained forward as he repeated his question.

“And Mira?”

Why did I feel I owed him the truth? Because I felt guilty about feeling jealous? Stupid, stupid, stupid man. “She's arrested—to hurt you.” When he didn't answer, I babbled on. Was I trying to hurt him, or to prove that I—whoever I am—was superior to his genius? “Her sentence is ten years with no right to correspondence.”

He didn't answer immediately. Then, “That means a bullet in the head.” Another pause. “The death penalty is illegal. Supposedly.” He didn't flinch. I'll give him that, he didn't flinch. “When?”

“A week from today.” I waved my hand at the antique opulence

of his study. "You die penniless. Stalin doesn't imprison you, but he breaks you—he thinks. Yet you write for the desk"—fine Russian phrase, hope I remember it when I no longer remember Russian—"and produce the greatest, most profound, most heart-wrenching music ever heard."

"Thinking of Mira." Oh, he's quick. He stares at me with hatred oozing from the wounds in his soul.

Don't hate me. Please. I'm not a person, just a Voice. A voice no one hears. Thinking and speaking for the desk.

LAILA, LAILA. I WISH I'D FORGOTTEN YOU LIKE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN me.

Have you ever seen me? Ever gazed upon the ruin you created and wondered if perhaps the end didn't justify the means? Realized that a symphony wasn't worth a man's soul?

Have you learned that yet?

"No," Prokofiev said.

"What do you mean, no?" Because Laila doesn't even know me? Never did, and so couldn't have learned anything from my destruction? But how could Prokofiev know that?

"No. I won't let it happen."

Ah. He's talking about Mira. Not Laila.

"You're from the future. Don't let this happen."

I stare at him.

"Don't let this happen..." He buries his face in his hands.

This isn't going well. "Remember, no matter what, to avoid Banff Avenue on June 15, 1963. Okay?" When he doesn't answer, I add, "You have to live to finish your symphony."

"I don't care about that!"

He stares at me, shock slowly engulfing his face. Now—whenever *now* is—I understand the stare, the shock. Until that moment he'd never dreamed anything could be more important than his music.

"I don't care about that," he whispers. His voice is agonized. He clutches his chest. Staggeres to his feet.

"Mira," he gasps, stumbling toward the door, falling to his knees as he opens it. "Mira!"

LAILA! I KILLED HIM. I KILLED YOUR DREAM!

Don't let this happen.

Shock. Laila was shocked when I told her. Her face went white,

like Moscow snow.

“Go back. Quickly. Undo it all.”

I couldn’t even shake my head. It’s impossible to undo something you did as a Voice. Everyone knows that.

“Laila...” I let out a deep breath. “Ten years from the life of a major genius. That’s ... that’s a huge change.”

Through her tears, she slowly grasped what I meant. “But we haven’t destroyed history. We still know.”

I went cold. “Ripple-lag effect. Frog in the snake. The changes haven’t gotten here yet. It’s just theory, but...”

But how long? Not long, theory said. Minutes. Hours.

Facing up to reality—strange concept, *reality*, ever notice that?—was Laila’s finest moment. All manipulation and pretense vanished and I saw a different person. Not a fanatic, but a woman/child who’d wakened, tousled, from an obsessive nightmare. And if I’d loved her before, I adored her now.

She turned to me. Embraced me. Sobbed into my shoulder. Trusted me with her pain. Her guilt. In that moment of naked truth, she and I had a chance.

But she, too, was quick, if not as quick as Prokofiev. She stepped away from me. “You have to do what he asked.”

I stared at her.

Tears gathered fresh in her eyes. She turned away from my stare. “You have to save Mira. Stop the purge.”

But I have to be in the time stream with you when the ripple hits. Together! Together. Together...

Still, I ... I agreed.

DEVIL, DEVIL. I USED TO BE A DEVIL.

The temp probes spent just ten minutes searching. Incredibly short time, barely long enough for albertyne waves to make it when and back. Their answer: the madman closest to Stalin on March 5, 1953, was—

Stalin.

Told you.

WHEN I RETURNED FROM KILLING STALIN, FROM COMMITTING suicide, from inducing a stroke as we learned in case we got lost in time and needed to pull the ripcord, I expected Laila to greet me in the green room.

She didn't.

I should have expected that, should have convinced my heart of what my head knew. But I didn't. No. Remembering the way she'd held me, the way she'd kissed me before I phased into Stalin, the way she'd looked at me—like Mira!—I knew she'd have been there if she could. If she remembered me.

If I'd stayed with her, if I hadn't committed suicide, at least I'd have been there when the ripple hit. Maybe we'd still have known each other, somehow. Bonded by fate. At a minimum I wouldn't remember her, either.

Suicide.

Soul hurrrrrts.

HOSPITAL BED. SICK?

Don't feel sick. When am I? And why?

The voice leaning over me says he's my nephew, and he's trying to hire a private nurse for me. I open my eyes. He has gray-streaked hair, lines on his forehead. How long?

How long, I ask him. He doesn't answer.

I wonder where my sister is. In the next room? Dead? Could be; it's a long time. Fifteen years? No, that was how much longer Mira lived. A long time, though—and no Voice from the future has ever phased into me. Maybe we've learned, at last, not to use people. Told you I was a Hoper.

But ... it's getting hard to hope.

So hard.

NEPHEW'S GONE. ALL ALONE.

Still in a hospital bed, different room. Nicer. How many hours/weeks/years since he left?

Does it matter?

No. Nothing matters anymore.

Almost nothing. I close my eyes, listening to Prokofiev's Eighth, then his Ninth. My secrets. In this reality where God has discarded me like a used condom, Prokofiev wrote only seven symphonies.

Noise, soft and gentle like a mouse rummaging through a hollow mind. I'm not alone after all. Faced with an intruder, the music, my solace and savior, fades away.

"That's so beautiful," a woman's voice says. "Keep humming. Please."

A sudden cold knife seems to press against my throat. I was humming? And she *heard* me?

Angry at the intrusion, I resolve to stay quiet. Don't know, though, if I control the music or it controls me. I try to turn to look at her.

Can't! I see only what's in front of me.

Paralyzed?

Catatonic?

Dear God, I'm buried alive in my own body

"I majored in music," the voice says.

Frantic. Can't budge, can't turn to see her.

When she moves the bed to face the window, I glimpse a white, uniformed elbow.

Let me die, God. Please?

"One day I gave up music. Just like that, poof!" The voice slows. "It was the strangest thing. Out of nowhere, I realized my true calling was to care for troubled time travelers." Brisk again. "Over the years I've nursed more than half of all the Voices who ever cracked, so you're in good hands."

Slowly, her words seep through my despair. Can it possibly be? Oh God. God. Must see her...

Her good hands, gentle and soft, turn me on my side. Facing away from her. "Please hum some more." She lets out a tired, arthritic grunt as she sits. "That music... For some reason, it..." Her voice trails off.

She's crying.

Outside the window, Mount Baker floats majestically in the sky. An arrowhead pointing the way to heaven. Peace pours through the window.

I sing to Mount Baker. And to my beloved.

I'm the luckiest man who ever lived. 🍁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Preserving the Species

Leslie Brown

I WAS A MEMBER OF A PROTECTED SPECIES. THAT should have been enough to make me feel secure as I walked down the promenade on the upper viewing deck.

Nevertheless, the space between my shoulder blades itched like crazy when the conversations at the beverage tables halted as I passed by. It was understandable: Humans weren't seen much in the outer arm. If there was any doubt as to whether or not I was *Homo sapiens*, the tattooed mark of Protection between my eyebrows confirmed it. I resisted the urge to skulk and studied the wall menu by the dispenser. The prices were at the usual space station level, exorbitant beyond belief, but the ship I had taken passage on hadn't stocked coffee and I was desperate for a taste. I checked for the Bond icon that guaranteed that my beverage would be untouched by living hands and keyed in an order for the smallest size. I charged it to my sadly depleted credit chit. I was eligible for the protected species subsidy but it was paid on a yearly basis and I had two months to go before I could recharge my chit. On the Preserve, I would have had free food and housing, plus the subsidy to buy expensive toys, but that came with the obligation to stay where it was safe and boring

and make babies. Our benefactors called it Sanctuary. We called it the Preserve, Prez for short to remind us of those long ago reservations where we had interned members of our own species. I sometimes wished I could chuck the stress of living in the outside and stay with my extended and loving family on the Prez. One of the reasons I couldn't was the wanderlust, a palpable thing that kicked in on schedule when I had spent more than two months in the same place.

My coffee emerged from the dispenser complete with tamper-proof lid. I slipped into a chair at an empty table and sipped gratefully. The two Kails at the next table were staring at me and I made a gesture at them, one recognized by at least twelve species as offensive. They abruptly turned away but I still felt that I was the focus of their attention. There was a presence beside me and I tried to turn my flinch into a casual pivot. Just my luck, it was a Veshai. Half an hour on the damn station and already I was being pestered.

"May I speak with you?"

I was impressed. He spoke passable Prez. Not many Veshai bothered. I sat and stared at him. A non-response was usually taken for assent. He reached out and put a chit on the table. I picked it up between two fingers and ran it through the reader strapped on my wrist. It was all I could do not to raise my eyebrows at the amount. There was enough there to pay for a week at the most expensive hotel on the station. I placed the chit back on the table and tilted my head back in the interrogative position.

"A moment of your time, Shazit." Shazit was a gender-specific, semi-formal mode of address. He had recognized me as female. I converted the interrogative head tilt into one of positive assent. He sat down in the chair opposite me. I nodded towards the chit.

"I still keep that if you don't like my answers." I made it a statement, not a question.

"Certainly, Shazit." I scooped it into my belt pouch. I got more spending money this way.

"Proceed, Veshai." I was not skilled enough to guess which gender he was and only used the male pronoun for mental reference.

"I would like to purchase your eggs." My eyebrows raised in surprise. Usually the offer was for an embryo, preferably carried *in vivo* until birth but a transfer to an artificial womb was also acceptable. I leaned back in my chair.

"All of them?"

"Yes. I will pay you handsomely." The Veshai named a sum and I pursed my lips in a silent whistle. With that amount, I could buy the Prez, the planet it was on and have some left over for a nice summer cottage. I knew he had the money too. To approach me in public with a highly illegal proposal bespoke wealth and its accompanying power.

"You already have a sperm donor?" I asked.

"That need not concern you, Shazit. The eggs can be removed quickly and painlessly. You may have a Warden of Peace present during the procedure to ensure your own personal safety." His neck frill expanded briefly and subsided again down his back. He was getting excited because I had not refused immediately.

"I am going to have to know a few more details before I just sell off my eggs. You have a little private nature preserve set up, do you?"

His frill stayed flat. I could see he was considering how much he could tell me.

"The results of successful fertilization and parturition will be raised in a pleasant environment until sexual maturity. That will take about twenty bhal, I believe?"

"Eighteen to twenty bhal usually. So they will have a perfect childhood, will they? And then they get sold off?"

"Yes, of course, but that is not your concern. Your profit will come only from the sale of your eggs." His frill showed more signs of agitation. He thought he was pretty close to a deal. I tilted my head interrogatively.

"I'd still like to know where you are getting the sperm. You are using human sperm, I hope."

The Veshai looked indignant. "Of course, only a pure line will suffice. I would not waste such money and time, else. I have a human male on retainer. He is very happy with the arrangement."

I smiled, confident the Veshai could interpret the expression. "I'm sure he is. I am interested in meeting your human male on retainer. How much more would you pay for an *in vivo* child? As well as the eggs after."

The frill stood straight up. "I will not dissemble, Shazit; you can name your price." Of course I could. *In vitro* fertilization was very problematic with the damage human DNA had taken during the brief period that we had traveled freely through space. Artificial wombs had just as low a success rate. They had never fine-tuned them enough for human embryos. Besides, the product of a natural

human conception and birth had a cachet that was very appealing to a buyer.

"Let me meet your male. If I like him, we may just have a deal." Oops, I had agreed too soon. His frill had flattened.

"You have done this before, Shazit? Sold the products of your fertility?"

"Nope, had scruples until very recently. Lost big at the baji cylinders on the trip out here and now I'm stuck on Rekim station until I get some more credits. I was considering the sex trade until you approached me." All this was quite plausible and I had lost money gambling if he chose to check up on me. For all I knew, he had already done so. The sex trade was a viable means of getting credits. Some aliens were interested in humans just for sex.

"You had scruples, you say? It does not bother you, the use to which your offspring will be put?"

"I'll never see them, will I? Their fate is just theoretical to me. It might be harder to give up the baby, but the money will help me there. And I plan to ask you for quite a bit."

The frill was up again and so were my chances of making a deal.

"I will arrange a medical examination, Shazit, to ascertain that you can conceive and bear children. Of course we shall wait until after the delivery of your child before we remove the rest of the eggs. You may wish to contract with us for another live birth."

"Fat chance I'll want to go through that again but we'll see. I need some rest. What's the fanciest hotel on this orbiting junk heap?"

"The Silver Balance is the best here, Shazit. May I take the liberty of booking a room for you?" The Veshai was practically purring.

"You certainly may, and pay for it as well." I stood up to signify the end of the interview. He stepped back and bowed elaborately.

"I will bring the examiner to your room tomorrow, Shazit."

"Fine." I waved an impatient farewell and left the table. A quick glance at a wall chart showed me where the Silver Balance was located. If the Veshai was good, my room would be waiting for me.

The clerk at the Balance pulled my room pass from a slot as I entered and proffered to me. I took it but paused to grill her about security.

"Hallways monitored, visual and infra red? Panic button in every room of my suite?"

The clerk's secondary eyelids fluttered in distress that I should even briefly think that they were below standards.

"Shazit, all the Blaine stay here when they pass through the station. They regard our security as the finest to be had in this arm of the galaxy." The Blaine are endangered too. They secrete a milky liquid when frightened that has miraculous healing powers. Once I had seen a Blaine almost hit by a monotranspo and dozens of entities jumped on it when it started weeping.

"Fine. I want a meal delivered in two deciawns to my room, designed for Class Four stomachs."

"Of course, Shazit." I left the clerk's fluttering eyelids behind and slid into the high security digs my customer had purchased for me. I shed my smelly travel jumpsuit and ran a hot bath. I found some bubble bath equivalent and spent the rest of the evening in sybaritic pleasure.

I woke up with my usual nightmare and lay gasping on the smooth, cool sheets until my heart stopped pounding. I had been standing outside a closed door, my hand on the knob. The screams and wails came from the other side, my name mixed with wordless sobbing. I could hear my mother's and sisters' voices along with the high piping screams of children. The knob turned easily in my hand but I couldn't bring myself to open the door. Then I was grabbed from behind and pushed into the room, past white bodies hanging from chains, until we reached my own special place. I always woke up as my arms were pulled above my head. I cursed and took the pill waiting for my fumbling hand on the night table. It took effect almost immediately and I slipped back into sleep.

The Veshai barely waited until I had finished breakfast before he was calling up to my room. I let him and the medical examiner in and lay patiently on the bed while the examiner scanned my whole body. It stood and folded its tools into its garments.

"Fertile, no genetic abnormalities of consequence, wide hips, good breeder all round." With that flattering pronouncement, it turned and left the suite. The Veshai turned to me and introduced himself by name as was proper before a business deal.

"I am Cutai, Shazit."

"I am Hadass Mendoza, Shazim Cutai. I shall not haggle. I trust you to make me an offer that I will find acceptable." I had raised the bargaining to a higher level, forcing him to deal with me as he would another Veshai. I was watching closely but the old fox showed no surprise. Instead he made me an offer which I promptly accepted. He then produced a sensory inhibitor which had me taking an in-

voluntary step backward.

“That’s not part of the deal!”

“Shazit Hadass Mendoza, given the nature of my business, I must conduct all dealings in the safety and secrecy of my compound. It should reassure you that I am making certain that you will not be able to identify its location. The examiner has already scanned you for tracking devices and I have taken the liberty of confirming your losses at the baji cylinders. I also referenced your last two stopovers and found everything in order. Please, put this on and we can proceed with our business.”

Another Veshai, one with inferior caste markings, had appeared at the door with a mobile chair. I reluctantly put on the inhibitor visor and immediately lost my hearing and vision. I was guided into the mobile chair and sat bolt upright for the journey. I could not prevent the tremors that ran down my legs. My fear of helplessness was almost overwhelming although common sense told me that a Veshai bargain was immutable and I was safe.

As I anticipated, my inner ear felt the brief dip of weightlessness as we boarded a ship and switched from station to ship’s gravity. Rekim station shared its orbit around the uninhabitable planet below with about two hundred biospheres, some public but most very private. That the Veshai would have his breeding facility set up on one of these was an obvious conclusion but which biosphere would be impossible to determine. Again I felt the brief dip as we switched gravities with the biosphere and I felt the chair move. When the visor was finally removed, I was in an office, furnished in a typical Veshai fashion with low-to-the-ground tables and long cushions. It was carpeted with the best sound-absorbent material on the market. No doubt his entire complex was soundproof, given the nature of his business. Cutai helped me to my feet with a pronounced courtliness. I rubbed my face where the visor had been.

“So, do I get the grand tour?” I asked cheerfully. Cutai regretfully shook his head.

“I am sorry, Shazit, but I cannot let you see the extent of my holdings here. However, you can meet my sperm donor as requested and see one habitat with a social group.” He placed a long finger on my wrist and led me down a corridor to a featureless room with a viewing window set in one wall. On the other side of the wall was a park with green grass, a large playground and five children supervised by a Kail neuter. Approximately five years old, they were making

sandcastles using a particle bonding wand to hold the walls together. The three girls were all blond but the boys were both dark, most likely of Hispanic extraction. Cutai noticed my interest in the boys.

"I am very proud of that bloodline, Shazit. Very stoic with great endurance." I should have left well enough alone but I had to ask.

"And the girls?"

Cutai shrugged. "White skin. Contrasts well with blood." I turned so he would not see my expression.

"I guess that leaves the donor. Do I get to meet him now?"

"Certainly. He was still in his sleep cycle but we woke him to meet with you. He is eating his first meal. We have brought extra food for you if you would like to join him."

"Sounds good." I was again led down the hallway by the gentle pressure of his digit on my wrist. I noticed the route was calculated not to let me see anything more of his complex. The room we entered contained a human male tucking away a steak, done just the way I like it, rare and dripping red juice. However, it was the aroma of coffee in the room that made my mouth water.

"Shazim Glendening, this is Shazit Mendoza. She is considering a live birth and wanted to meet you." I winced. I would have preferred a more subtle introduction. The man, leering, looked me up and down.

"Beats a test tube any day, Cutai old man."

I walked to the door. "I don't like him. We will go the artificial insemination route." Cutai was alarmed. I had just knocked thirty percent off the final product. He hissed like a mongoose at Glendening who also looked alarmed. He held up his hands placatingly.

"Look, I'm sorry, Shazit. Have some coffee." Ah, the magic word. With a show of reconsidering, I finally took a seat opposite Glendening. Now that Cutai was on the defensive, I made my request.

"May I speak with Mr. Glendening privately? It would make me feel more comfortable." Cutai pretended reluctance but we both knew he had the whole complex bugged.

"Please," I added. "For future dealings." I had implied I might consider a second live birth and he all but tripped over himself to comply with my wishes. When the door had closed behind him, I poured myself some coffee and favored Glendening with a sweet smile.

"Do you enjoy your residency here, Mr. Glendening?" I asked. Meanwhile my hand, still holding the coffee pot, moved a few fingers

in the subtleties of Prez sign language, part Navaho, part Prez invention. I asked him with my fingers if he was a prisoner here but he glanced at my hand with distaste and then angled his head pointedly away. So that was the way the wind blew. Fine.

"It's great here," he replied to the verbal question. "Great food, great accommodations, plenty of entertainment. I love it. And my only job is to do what comes naturally into a tube now and then." He looked me in the eye then to clearly express just how satisfied he was with this arrangement. I phrased my next question carefully.

"And you don't care what happens to the children? Your children? I must admit, I am having a bit of difficulty with that still." He smirked at me.

"Look here, Miz Mendoza. We humans are a commodity, plain and simple. It isn't our fault that we are the only species that can both endure torture and feel the pain. Those little kiddies wouldn't exist at all if Cutai didn't need them made. I figure they get fourteen years of the good life. What more can a human ask these days?"

I took a sip of coffee.

"Maybe not to die screaming in agony after days, weeks, months of torture. Don't they deserve to be more than a live toy for a small number of species considered depraved by most of the civilized universe?" Oops, I had climbed a little too high on my soap box. Glendenning's eyes had narrowed.

"Hey, you sound a little too much like those bleeding heart Prezcoops. If I didn't believe that Cutai had you checked out back to your great-grandmother on your father's side, I'd think you were a plant."

Time for a little hard ball.

"Look here, pal, just because I'm in a little financial trouble and have to bail myself out doesn't mean I have to like what I'm doing. I always thought that we humans ought to stick together and I was hoping you'd give me a hand here. Help soothe my conscience, if you know what I mean." I gave him my number-one come-hither look and watched him swallow the bait, hook and all. He got up and came around the table to stand behind me. My legs started to tremble and I locked my knees. I don't often let someone get behind me. He ran his hands over my shoulders and across my breasts, alert for any drawing back on my part. I leaned into his caress and then stood to face him. I nibbled his lower lip and felt his hands tighten on my hips, pulling me to him.

"Don't get the real thing often, Glendening?" I asked softly.

"Call me Bill. Sure, I do. It's part of the perks around here, babe." He buried his face between my breasts. He came up for air and to finish his sentence. "I get first pick of the matured social groups. Don't get me wrong, not my own kids, but there are plenty other bloodlines."

I smiled at him. "Bill, you are making this so easy."

"What do you—"

I slipped the steak knife in between his second and third ribs and carefully up into his heart. I held him in my arms until the abused organ gave its last flutter and let him slide into the chair I had vacated. I summoned up the rage that triggered the homing device buried deep in my cerebellum, an anger that always lay just below the surface of my consciousness. I placed the other chair against the door as Cutai's employees began hammering at it. The implant pumped endorphins and adrenaline into my system and I savored the familiar high.

As the door splintered, I hefted the breakfast table and threw it at the first two through the opening. They fell back against the others trying to enter the room and caused a nice tangle of bodies. I waded into them, snatching a weapon from a flailing hand and then hauling its owner up against me. I stepped back from the mêlée and glanced at the weapon in my hand. As I had expected, it was a sedater rather than something more dangerous. One couldn't have the help accidentally damaging valuable merchandise. The Kail I was holding in front of me sprouted several darts before I could take everyone down. Cutai had not anticipated an internal threat with the biosphere being almost unbreachable and the children docile. As a result, his security guards left much to be desired.

I tossed the unconscious Kail back on the pile of its fellows and trotted down the hallway. I had no idea how long it would take for reinforcements to arrive. They couldn't track me too closely or the biosphere's scanning systems would pick them up. I might as well take my grand tour while I was waiting. For lack of clearer directions, I returned to the viewing window of the playground, but it was empty of children. I chose a corridor at random and went down it. There were no auditory alarms going even though the whole complex must be aware that I was running amok. I guess frightening the merchandise was a no-no.

I flung open the first door I came to. In the room were the five

children I had observed. They were seated at a Veshai style table, little legs folded under them, eating from bowls of different colors. I'd bet the best-behaved child of the morning always got the red bowl. I shot their Kail nursemaid with a dart and left the door open without alarming the children further but with the hope that they would wander out and hinder my pursuers. The eating rooms were all conveniently lined up for me and I repeated my methodology with surprising ease. When I got to the ten-year-old age groups, I went in the room and examined the children. I ignored the girls and looked closely at the face of each of the boys. They gazed back at me with mild curiosity only. Those children earmarked to be trained for aggression wouldn't start their conditioning until the hormones of puberty kicked in. None of the ten-year-old boys were from the Hispanic bloodline I had noticed earlier. The door was flung open behind me and I spun, darter at the ready. Roper pulled his head back and then peered into the room more cautiously.

"Knew I'd find you with the ten-year-olds, Hadass, and so does Mushall. He's found the body of the man already and wants your ass in a sling." Roper came forward with the nasal spray to counteract my implant's stimulation of the fight or flee brain centers but I waved him away.

"No, this isn't over yet."

Roper scowled. "Last time you pulled a stunt like this and talked to Mushall all hyped up, he almost gave you a one-way ticket to the Prez. I'm not going to let you screw your life up. Tilt your head back." I looked up at the ceiling and endured a noseful of neutralizing agent. Immediately I calmed, the upright hairs on my arms relaxing. Roper wouldn't meet my eyes. He didn't always approve of me but we humans stick together.

"That man. Did it have to be an execution?"

"Prez justice, Roper. He was a willing participant and sampled the produce before it got shipped out."

"Mushall has told you again and again, we need these men and women for questioning. Plus you're helping kill off an endangered species."

"Roper, I question them. I also decide if they should be allowed to contribute to the gene pool any further. In this case, it was a big no."

Roper looked frustrated but before he could say what was on his mind, Mushall came in, ducking so he wouldn't smash his pointy

head on the six-foot door lintel. He didn't waste any time and grabbed me by the lapels of my coverall. He hauled me up against the wall to his eye level, leaving my feet to dangle in empty air. One of the ten-year-olds started crying, but the rest watched with avid interest.

"No more, Mendoza, no more." He shook me on every second word. "You are no longer stable enough to be an operative. I am sending you back to Sanctuary. Give me an argument and I will have that tattoo between your eyes removed and cast you off on Rekim station." I hung in his grip without responding and gradually he lowered me until my feet could touch the ground. I shrugged out of his loosened grip and tugged my coverall back down into place. I tried out a grin on him.

"Good catch this time, huh, Mushall? What a set up. He must have at least a hundred kids here."

"Do not distract me, Mendoza. You are too uncontrolled in the field. I am going to have to replace you."

None of Chief Warden Mushall's female operatives had my track record and he knew it. I had provided him with a success rate in the last nine years that had firmly cemented his position in the bureaucratic system of our protectors. A few more years of the same and his job would be converted to hereditary to be passed on to his most promising offspring when he retired. Mushall correctly interpreted the look in my eyes and stuck a finger under my nose the size of a kielbasa sausage.

"Perhaps, Shazit Mendoza, you might take into consideration the possibility that I value my operatives and the safety of the children more than my standing in the Division of Protection. Perhaps the Shazit will consider an apology and the presentation of an honor promise to me that this will not happen again. You will kill no more collaborating humans. You will not go wandering off after you have activated the implant."

I went cold. This time he meant it. Mushall's people did not toss the words "honor promise" around loosely. I cleared my throat self-consciously.

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Honor promise?"

"On my word of honor." *Cross my heart and hope to die* went unspoken on my lips. Mushall would not appreciate humor at this point.

"Mendoza," he said with a gentleness that twisted my innards. "You know I will let you see the children before they are sent off to rehabilitation. I always have in the past." His black, double-pupiled eyes caught mine and I nodded a silent acknowledgement, not trusting my voice. I really hadn't planned to take down Glendening. I was always punishing the collaborators for not only their crimes but my own as well.

Mushall, assured of my sincerity, left me to follow with Roper. Already the social workers had gathered up the children and were herding them towards the docking area. Roper lent me his arm for support without comment as the last of the endorphins left my system and I started to physically crash. We passed Cutai in restraint bands but I barely spared him a glance. He was already dead in my eyes, that being the penalty for breeding and trafficking in a protected species. Roper seated me in the Warden's shuttle and got me a drink. I sipped it and stared at the bulkhead in front of me.

"Not there? Did you get a look at all the tenners?" His voice came from behind me, unwelcome. I liked to brood after an unsuccessful mission (according to my criteria) and he was intruding. I shook my head and felt his hand cup my cheek.

"We'll find him, Hadass. We have time." I shook my head again causing his hand to fall away.

"Not necessarily, Sam. Only the connoisseurs like Cutai wait until the kids are sixteen or older. Someone could be doing my little boy right now and I have no way of knowing where."

"Hadass, you can't keep blaming yourself. You were off the Prez, strung out on drugs. You didn't know what you were doing." I turned in the seat to look at him straight on.

"What kind of mother sells her baby, Sam?" He didn't answer me.

Mushall swung into the cabin and took his seat at the controls. He glanced back at me and decided I needed perking up.

"Do you want some down time, Hadass, or can we slip you into this nice little identity we have prepared on Amar? You can be the pet of a wealthy Misian female. Silk cushions and all the delicacies you can eat."

I gave him the smile he was waiting for.

"Sure, Mushall, I'm your girl. Bring on the diamond-studded leashes." Roper gave my hand a squeeze before strapping himself in. I looked out the port at the receding biosphere. What kind of mother indeed? ❁

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Tempus Fugitive

Hayden Trenholm

VENGEANCE IS A DISH BEST SERVED COLD. THIS one will be cold as fucking ice, served long after I'm dead and gone and forgotten.

That's the part what hurts the most, that no one will ever know it was me, Branson Twist, who brought down the Arakan empire. I can see you laughing, whoever you are, Brother X, reading this message in an air bottle. If anyone ever does. Goes to show you what we do to live forever. Run away from a cozy life in a Martian prison to certain death on the surface on the off-chance someone will find this, my last will and testament, and give credit where credit is due. Thinking I'm right, and what I did worked and it ain't the fevered imaginings of a former cokehead and traitor to humanity.

The Arakans are a funny people—though the thousand worlds they've conquered ain't found much to laugh at. The thing is—those motherfuckers never forget. Sort of like three-legged elephants that way. Do them a service and nothing you do after wipes away the memory of that favor. Which is why I'm still alive, I guess, and not torn to ribbons like the rest of the brothers who tried to kill their high

commander. It's nothing moral. You can't understand Arakans in terms of morality or any other human value. Arakans never forget because they can't. Everything that ever happens to one of them becomes part of his memory, imprinted right into his fucking genetic code, passed on to the entire race—and not just through breeding either. Arakans eat their ancestors, ingest them for their memories and for the power they bring. Like planaria, if you remember your high school biology.

It redeems them somehow—that endless memory, that biological imperative to groove the past into the present. Because other than that, they're the most brutal and ruthless colonizers and mofos the universe ever spawned. They make the cocksuckers what rounded my ancestors into slave ships look like the model of Christian sainthood.

But I'm wandering now. Hard radiation affects you that way. So here it is. The true shit on how the Arakans conquered the Earth. No holds barred. Just as it happened.

WHEN THE FIRST SIGNALS CAME FROM WAY OUT BEYOND PLUTO, everyone uptown got so excited, talking all this First Contact shit, like it would make a difference to the man on the street. Oh, it made a difference to the Man all right. Gave him another reason to whack the heads of black folk for protesting cutbacks to welfare. So they could spend it on listening to some alien shit instead. I wasn't going to admit it but it made me so excited, too. But not for the same reasons.

Those signals sounded just exactly like the high joyful painful notes Miles made right at the end, when he was already dying from sticking too many needles in his arm—and don't let no one tell you it was no AIDS shit, neither. Miles died of a stroke from living the high life, or maybe from not being able to live it no more. So what I figured was, this weren't no alien motherfucker at all but the spirit of Miles Davis come back to haunt whitey. I mean I could see all those uptown TV preachers and the Pope bursting blood vessels when they found out that the second coming of Christ was none other than Miles fucking Davis.

Course, I was doing a lot of coke back then, snorting, free-basing, whatever was happening, though I stayed away from injecting less I knew it was a clean needle. I did coke when I was flush and crack when I wasn't, which was cheaper and faster but didn't really put

no more bite on your soul than the regular fairy dust but only got a bad name and a harsher time from the law because niggers did it instead of rich white boys.

They would play the signals sometimes on NASA TV and, man, if you really listened, you could hear Miles right there in the notes. No melody exactly or least not one I could figure out but I thought, shit, Miles had been to heaven and what the hell would someone like me know about what counted for melody among the angels. So, I'd get out my sax and play along, following him note for note, letting the music get up in my body, playing underneath the song, never trying to go nowhere it didn't, because like Miles said about playing with Bird—how could I lead the leader of all music?

And that's how I learned to speak Arakan—with a head full of coke and dreams of Miles coming home.

THE SIGNALS BEEN COMING IN FOR ABOUT A YEAR BY THE TIME I got hooked into the Brotherhood. The suits on CNN claimed they were getting closer but, by now, I figured it was all made up—same way they faked landing on the moon back in the 60s, and for pretty much the same reasons, too. Back then it was to take their minds off Vietnam—which is something no one seems to remember now, that the moon landing happened to connect with the heaviest bombing and highest casualties of the war. Now they wanted us to forget we was going through the third world economic collapse in less than fifteen years—though they didn't call it that neither, a “financial adjustment to globalization” was the bullshit that buzzed the airwaves then. Not that it bothered the uptown crowd with their gated communities and endless entitlements—they wasn't losing their jobs or, worse yet, keeping them—working for three bucks an hour and no benefits and don't complain or I'll kick your lazy black ass out on the street, you people don't know when you're well off. They didn't give a shit when the money what used to go for welfare or housing projects or training for real jobs got shoved up the ass of a rocket ship and got burned faster than a two-dollar reefer.

Which is why I was playing a benefit in the first place. Some brothers had decided to go beyond marching on Washington and had planted a bomb in a New York office building that housed some suspicious computer set-up, part of the hardware what was faking the signals. They were doing life at New Attica even though no one had been hurt in the blast—another demonstration of how fucked up this

country's value system is. Shit, same week they got sent up, a dude in a Mercedes run over a kid trying to wash his windshield cause he was afraid the nigger was going to cut him. He got three years fucking suspended and community service even though the kid never walked again.

So anyway, I'm doing this gig, playing sax in a trio with a piano and drums, and we're just messing around, playing some standards in front of a small but unenthusiastic crowd when some white mofo, who must have been feeling lonely cause he was the only one there, jumps up and says, "Play something new, something hot." We was feeling pretty phat so I nodded and told the others to lay down a doo-bop track and I started playing the shit I'd learned from NASA TV. And then it got real quiet in the club, even the waitresses saying, fuck the tips, I gotta listen to this mother play. And that's when I knew everything was going to change.

CELEBRITY'S A FUNNY THING. YOU CAN BE THE MEANEST motherfucker in town, doing real badass shit with drugs and guns and women, but once you get phat, all is forgiven. So. After my first DVD came out, and it was clear a new master sax master had imploded on the scene, I didn't play no more dingy clubs. Unless I wanted to, which I sometimes did because in the end you got to be connected back to where you come from—if only to keep reminding yourself you don't never want to go back.

The other thing is—once you're famous, people turn to you for all kinds of other shit you don't really know nothing about. Your opinions on politics and race and the meaning of music. As if I knew that—I only played the shit and half the time I wasn't even clear on what I was playing cause the money was good and drugs were bountiful. And I guess I would have come and gone like a hundred other one-track brothers before me, sucked dry of all I had to give by the establishment except for three things.

First, I got scared. I got scared of being asked questions I didn't know no answers for. I did me something I never done before, which was to read and to look into the way things really were. I read all the shit the Panthers read and wrote before half of them were dead and the other half found Jesus. And I jiggled that revolution wasn't as simple as I was led to believe by the Brotherhood.

Not that none of that would have mattered if it weren't for event number two which was when my trumpeter came up to me, exactly

the way Dizzy had gone to Bird, and said that I either had to shove shit up my nose or blow it out through my sax but I couldn't keep on doing both. And for some reason, maybe cause I'd been reading and thinking so much, I listened to him the way Bird hadn't listened to Dizzy. And I chose music. And I found I made a lot more of it too though sometimes I still needed a snort to find that final note, to bring it to completion. But that's no different than any other discipline you might apply to yourself to get to where you was going. Like fasting in the desert—one demon giving you the strength to wrestle a bigger one.

Still, I was walking on a knife's edge tween the abyss of oblivion and the chasm of conformity. And I might have fallen to one side or the other, if the Arakans had not chosen that moment to arrive in all their motherfucking extraterrestrial glory.

THE ARAKANS' FIRST GESTURE AS THEY ENTERED THE INNER system was one of generosity, of gentleness. The ship NASA launched to meet the visitor fucked up beyond the orbit of Mars. The three crew were near death and far from the path of the Arakan cruiser, beyond hope of rescue. Yet the Arakans rescued them anyhow, sending a high-speed scout to snatch them from the asteroid belt and bring them home. Who could forget those last few whippers of gratitude from "Captain Cosmos" mixed in with the Arakan signal? And if they all died on that long slow trip back to earth, who could blame the Arakans for that? Aliens couldn't be expected to know how to keep a man alive and it was the gesture what counted. With Arakans, a gesture was usually all you got.

Me, I thought they were pretty shrewd to make that gesture—almost calculating—as if they had somehow arranged the whole thing, but then cocaine makes you paranoid and keeps you that way for a long time, even after you stop using it every day.

Still, it was a good beginning, that human gesture of returning the bodies home. It made up for the fact the Arakans were as ugly as shit, no, worse than ugly, horrifying in ways no Hollywood alien ever been, cause the Arakans were real flesh-and-blood monsters with a lot more teeth and claws than what seemed necessary for an intelligent space-faring race. I still remember the President saying we shouldn't judge a book by its cover or our new friends by their startling appearance. Like that motherfucker hadn't built his whole career around judging people by their appearance or by the country

of their birth.

No one seemed too concerned at the time that the Arakan mother ship was nearly eight miles long, especially after they found out it only had six Arakans on board. You can't conquer a whole planet with only six soldiers, can you?

All that came later, after the Arakans landed. When the ship was first hurtling in, half the population was terrified of the end of the world, a lot worse than they had been during the bullshit build-up to the millennium which people still bore you with even though it was over thirty years ago. Ancient fucking history to me. The other half seemed more joyous than scared, hoping to be taken away from this hell-on-earth to some sort of otherworld paradise. Then you had the half who still thought it was some kind of conspiracy—pick your favorite conspirator—and the half who just didn't know what to think or who were trying to think of how this would benefit them or who were too busy making souvenirs to think at all. And if that seems like too many halves, put it down to my lack of math skills or to the fact that most people were of two or three minds about the whole fucking thing anyway.

Me, I was so deep in my music now, I didn't care. I wanted to see the creators of this beautiful noise, to see if I could look into their eyes or whatever passed for eyes and see the soul of Miles Davis sitting there, cause I was still convinced they had somehow captured his spirit floating out in space and made it a part of themselves. And, in a way, I wasn't far from what the truth could be. At least, I hope so.

Everyone heaved a kind of a sigh of relief when the Arakans rescued "our boys," except them what thought it was part of the conspiracy, but with CNN blasting into a billion households, those voices tended to be silenced in the uniform roar of the official truth—except in Afghanistan and Serbia and the few others holding out against the twenty-first century. But they didn't count for shit. To anyone except the Arakans.

Me, I wasn't much concerned about what all those uptown voices had to say, but listening to them was part of the price I had to pay to hear the star song of the aliens, so I was bound to pick up some (dis)information in the process. By now, I was thinking on things in a different way—noticing some of the establishment was black and not cause they were toms or oreos or any of the other terms we use to dis brothers who are sitting in a different place from us—seeing, too, it was also about power and money and values. No big surprise

to a Farakan or a Mandela or a LeRoi, I guess, but a righteous revelation to me. And I'm telling you this to show how ripe I was for the picking, how full of juice waiting to be squeezed.

So. I would listen to the songs of the Arakans and everyone trying to figure out what they meant—looking for patterns of prime numbers or mathematical constants or the value of pi—or some sort of sequencing they, in their (can I say it?), universal arrogance, thought every intelligent race must use to make first contact. If they asked me, or anyone who didn't think in straight lines, we could have told them about playing off the melody, about syncopation, about patterns that exist in the absence of pattern, about jazz in all its motherfucking simple complexity.

But, naturally, they weren't going to listen to no one unless I made them listen. Which is why I released *Star Song* when I did, a couple of weeks before the mother ship reached earth orbit, blasting their own sound back to them, mixed with my notes and the cut-up arguments of the experts, mixed up until they made no sense, unless you understood jazz.

And it was after the breakthrough came and the first message in the languages of earth arrived. English, Russian and German. The same three languages represented in the crew NASA had sent, if you hear what I'm saying. Who can forget those words? For their beauty or their irony?

“We come in peace.”

THE ARAKAN STRATEGY WAS SIMPLE. IT HAD BEEN USED FOR hundreds of years on earth to enslave people and destroy resistance. All you had to do was look. The trouble was that whitey—and I use that term now as I did then to mean everyone settled comfortably in the seat of power, whether they was white or black, brown or yellow, male or female or any other fucking dichotomy of oppression (and didn't I say I read books?) you might want to tag them with—was incapable of looking at history without seeing it as a grand struggle of heroic forces and not an endless litany of lies and deceit. Take Cortes. The first view of Cortes was he conquered the Aztecs cause of superior technology, civilized, read white, bravery and the mojo power of the mofo cross. The second was even simpler—the Aztec were defeated by smallpox. Everyone conveniently forgets Cortes persuaded all the peoples the Aztecs defeated and oppressed in the previous round to rise up against them. And when they was

all done scragging each other it was simple for the surviving few to step in and claim the spoils.

History is written by the victors. There is no more truth in it than there's reality in a nose full of coke.

So. The Arakans slid into earth orbit wrapped in both mystery and goodwill and the first thing they did was return the bodies, or what was left of them, to the bosom of the earth. That was a scene even Spielberg couldn't have produced. I later thought it was ironic he'd been trotted out—nearly ninety and not all there really—to be part of the welcome when the first Arakan shuttled down to the White House lawn. The Arakans sent ahead images but it was still a shock when “Captain” Vortak stepped from his ship. Larger than your average horse, the Arakan squatted on three muscular legs, distributed around his body like the points of a triangle. The body sprouted three powerful arms with, naturally, three mutually opposing digits. Three eyes on mobile tendrils surrounded one enormous mouth. Of course, anyone who has met the Arakams know this mouth is fitted with three rows of teeth and leads to three separate gullets—and my high school biology don't extend to explaining that wierd shit. Like they know the term given by the Arakans as Captain really translates as Lord High Slaughtergod—which might have been a clue to even the most deluded new-age assholes.

You could see, even through the digital image fixes, the President blanched when faced with Vortak, and I guess it's to his credit that he didn't hesitate but strode with open hand to greet the first alien (what we know about) to stand on the soil of Earth. And I guess it's to the Arakan's credit he didn't tear the President's arm right the fuck off, considering the gesture was an insult on more worlds than a few. Instead he extended one of his own arms and shook hands just like a regular ambassador. The Arakans can exercise great self-control when it's in their interest to do so.

What the Arakan did then was completely unexpected. He gave a speech. In English, Russian and German. Simultaneously. For six hours. As if he'd been doing it all his life. Which, in a sense, he had been.

I won't bore you with the details. You can look it up if you want—if not on Earth then on any other planet the Arakans have visited. They give the same speech pretty much everywhere they go. And why not? It works ninety-five percent of the time. And don't bother looking for it on the planets where it doesn't work—they aren't there

anymore.

The soul of the speech was this: *We are a great peace-loving people, representatives of a federation containing many races. We'd love to welcome you to the hood but can't as long as oppression lives among you. Free the enslaved, raise up the weak, educate the ignorant and liberate those now downtrodden. Freedom now!*

There was no advice on how to accomplish all this shit, only a deadline of one year. The Arakans would watch the results from on high. When the year was up, they would either welcome us into the federation (with all kinds of goodies to follow) or they'd fuck off to the next planet on their list.

I'd like to tell you the people of Earth put aside their differences and united to create a harmonious and egalitarian society. But then, if that had happened, the Arakans would have snuffed out our sun and you wouldn't be reading this at all.

Instead, we fell to squabbling amongst ourselves, arguing about who was oppressing who. Even simple things like what ignorance was, or slavery, became issues for neighbors to kill neighbors about. And all the while, the Arakans were providing advice and technological aid to the good guys, which from the Arakan point of view was anyone willing to go to war for a principle or even from a lack of principles. And the most important bit of technology they distributed was the nuclear-dampening field generators. The Arakans weren't averse to war but didn't want to see no planet wrecking. A nuclear wasteland ain't no use to no one.

Course, nobody, or almost nobody, knew nothing about any of this. As far as the world could tell, the aliens were locked up in their ship tighter than a Miles quintet, with not so much as an electromagnetic wave escaping—other than a few bursts in their own language beamed back into the depths of space.

But the Arakans had their secret ways of communicating and their chosen few on earth to communicate with. I should know. I was one of them.

THE ARAKANS GOT A WAY OF SPOTTING POTENTIAL ALLIES. I SUPPOSE it comes from spending the last hundred thousand years conquering this end of the galaxy. What they say, experience is the best teacher.

Choosing me was probably easier than most. I'd made myself known to them with the broadcast of *Star Song* and one of the first

things the Arakans did in the few weeks they spent on earth before returning to their ship was ask to meet me as part of a cultural exchange. It was the only time I ever saw two Arakans together in one place and, at the time, I had no idea how significant *that* was. It's not that Arakans can't be in the same room together—their wills are stronger than their animal natures—but they certainly don't like it and avoid it except when necessary—which explains, in part, why their starship is eight miles long.

It wasn't just my music they was interested in—though I think it did fascinate them in a peculiar Arakan way. At least, I hope so.

I had risen pretty high in the ranks of the Brotherhood, thanks to my sudden super-celebrity status. We live in a nation that elects actors and sports stars to high office for no other reason than they are actors and sports stars. Celebrity got its privileges, one of which is access to power. True, I'd done a lot to educate myself in the ways of revolution but the reality was without my horn I'd never have been nothing but a foot soldier in the liberation wars.

The Arakans offered me something I'd always wanted but never really dreamed of having. They showed me how I could be the leader and not just the front man for the movement. They offered me power but, more important, they treated me like I was the most righteous dude they had ever had the pleasure to witness. They made me believe I mattered to the future of mankind.

Some might put my gullibility, maybe stupidity, down to the fact I was back on the fairy dust and had even started chipping H from time to time. Not me. That's the easy way out—to claim I ain't responsible. Or even to claim I was fooled by the Great Satan from Outer Space. But the truth is, I knew exactly what I was doing. I was bringing down whitey and whatever the fucking consequences—and I knew there would be consequences—that lifelong dream and ever-so-righteous cause (and I still think it was righteous even now) seemed more than worth it. The world round me stank to high heaven and, if nothing else, some motherfucker was going to pay before it was all said and done.

That's how I got to be one of the three hundred and you'd be shocked as I was to find out who the other two hundred and ninety nine were. Imagine me and the fucking President riding on the same bus. The three hundred who, by word and deed, crippled the Earth's capacity to resist, depleted our populations, reversed the course of history in twelve short months. Now, looking back, I think we were

on the road to the Promised Land—not the False Promise offered by the Arakans but the genuine article—and would have made it, too, if we'd had another fifty years to work it out.

But that's all coke dreams now. What could have been, what should have been has vanished into what is. And there ain't nothing left for me but revenge.

THE YEAR HAD DONE COME AND GONE BEFORE ANYONE NOTICED the Arakans were still hanging around. We certainly hadn't achieved no peace on earth, goodwill towards men. Half the population was dead or dying from poison gas and biological horror and the other half was scrambling around trying to survive or, at least, take someone with them when they went.

Almost no one was looking at the heavens and, since distrust and betrayal were the watchwords of the day, no one really listened or believed when CNN announced eight more ships approaching the earth. By the time we did wake up to the fact it was all over but the hollering anyway. I'm not sure six soldiers can conquer a planet but seventy-two motherfuckers armed to the teeth with the end-products of a hundred millennia of war sure as fuck made short work of our broken world.

As for me, I wised up right before the end. Figured out I was trading one whitey for another. I even conned myself into thinking it weren't too late to resist, which is why I got mixed up in the plot to kill the Lord High Slaughtergod. I can't even suggest it was coke that led me into that foolishness. I'd been clean and sober for nearly six months by then. It was over before it began and all it won was a quick death for my comrades and the Arakan equivalent of a stern lecture for me.

Those of us of the three hundred what survived—eighty-three to be exact—were brought to Mars to live out our lives in considerable more comfort than the slaves back on Earth. Not that it's really Earth no more. The Arakans are turning it into a copy of their homeworld—not a place suited to humans. We break too easy. When they're done, the humans what remain will be taken off-world or set up on reserves at the poles. Or so my captors tell me. The Arakans do appreciate diversity in their federation—it reminds them of their own superiority.

FOR THREE YEARS, I HAD NOTHING TO SHOW FOR MY CAPTIVITY but despair. Despair at the fate of my planet, despair at the behavior

of my prison-mates. We're down to fifty-one now, suicide and murder accounting for the rest. Old habits die hard and a knife in the dark pays for lots of sins.

I almost went the same route myself. I'm not sure what turned it around in the end. Maybe it was the ghost of Miles whispering in my ear. It took a while but at least I picked up my sax again. But I'd gone beyond improvisation, beyond fooling around with magic. I didn't have enough joy left in me for that. I wanted to create something, something solid. All I had was the material around me. The Arakans. I listened to them, not just their talk but what passed for their music. It was all ritual and forbidden, but I always had a way of persuading people to let me in on things and, in the end, I guess, Arakans are people, too. So I got to hear some of their most holy sounds and I've woven it into my final masterpiece. I call it *D Minor Revolution for Sax and Piano*—though sometimes I call it *D Minus Revolutionary* as a final comment on my own actions in this whole sorry affair. Somehow it's found its way back to the camps on Earth—the spirit of Miles Davis maybe wafting along communication lines that ain't supposed to exist.

But I didn't compose it for Earth or even for myself. I composed it for the Arakans. I've played for as many of them as I can. Six, so far. They listen politely, taking it in, absorbing it like they're wired to do.

Jazz is about revolution, about liberation, about freedom. It is, I believe, the totality of our finest parts. In jazz there is no color, no race, no gender, no difference. There are only players and no matter what values you have when you're not playing, when you are, there is only one value. It is, as Coltrane put it, a love supreme.

Someday, all these notes are going to come back to haunt the Arakans. I don't know how but somehow it will happen. Arakans never forget. They'll never forget my music and it will change them. Some day.

But I'm not relying on memory alone. For all I know the six I've played for have tin ears. I got a trick up my sleeve.

IT'S A LITTLE KNOWN FACT BUT IT'S POSSIBLE TO PERFORM BRAIN surgery on yourself. That's probably just as well. You got to be determined but once you get through the scalp there's no pain and no blood. The skull takes a little work but if you're not concerned about permanent damage to the brain beneath you can get through pretty

quick. I wasn't concerned.

I was careful though. I did my research. The Arakans don't cheat their Martian pets of nothing—not even the Library of fucking Congress. I knew where music lived. Another brilliant career sacrificed. Getting the tissue into the central Arakan food supply was a bit more difficult—especially with a hole in my head. But I'd planned it well. I could have done it in my sleep. Good thing, too. Cutting into your brain does strange things to your thinking process.

THAT'S IT THEN. THE DESTRUCTION OF EARTH AND MY ROLE IN it. The story of my revenge. Hope someone finds this. And remembers Branson Twist.

Have to go out now. To meet the Arakans. Can't have them find me here. Can't have them read this message in a bottle. Wish I had some coke now. I think I'd like to die high and free.

I must not have got it all. The music, I mean. I can still hear it faintly. Hope I got enough. Hope I...

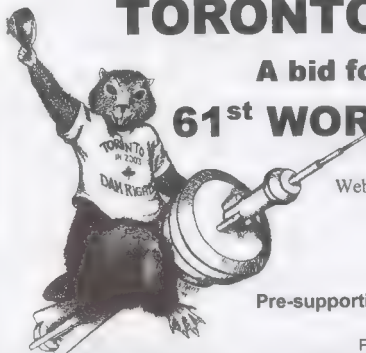
Oh, God, listen to it. Listen to it. The notes of heaven.

Play on, Miles, play on. ♣

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Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter

Steve Mohn

I HAD A THEORY OF MEMORY ONCE (I'M OLD, I forget it) but I have this dream, like a movie. I'm on horseback. In those days that was how you went. I have a car now but it's not mine. Nothing is. I'm in a thunderstorm, very dark or I'd never have gone out. Sheets of rain, the road running mud. Green lightning jumping in cloudy canyons like brain convolutions. (Some meaning there.)

There are things you see in dreams and things you hear. Then there are things you know. In this dream, I ride into the storm, lashing my horse after a priest I *know* is in the next town. If the storm keeps up I can find him and kill him, then find a dark place to hide.

Another thing I *know*: this priest has buried my sister alive. I never had a sister. Before I kill him, I'll make him tell me where he buried

her, just as I made my old nurse tell me where the priest was. She had betrayed my mother and sister but loved me because she believed I could make her into One Like Myself. Instead, I beat her brains out on the floor, roaring that both parents had to be the *same* or the kids muled-out and died young. “They *died!*” I pounded her head on the stones. She’d been in the family for years, bent, scrawny as a chicken neck, believing that if I made her One Like Myself she would be beautiful again but I don’t recall that she was ever pretty. Also, I never had a nurse. But she told me where to find the priest. So I rode into the storm. I must have been insane. It was afternoon—it was day!

Another thing I know: they had tied my mother to a stake. The sun came up and blew her away. My mother! And those men, like turnips—if you can see turnips having the vote. So I ride, lashing my horse, because the rain is letting up, the lightning is walking away on the hills, those cloudy convolutions are brighter. There are no houses near, it’s desolate and I’m a long way from home.

MY HOME IS A SHACK. A TWO-ROOM SHACK, A SWAMP BEHIND IT. People dump trash where the creek flows in. I don’t know how long I’ve been here. I have no watch, no calendar, no appointments. But sometimes I get wake-up calls.

It’s late afternoon, overcast. My area averages forty-five days of sunlight a year. I’m dreaming that I’m in a movie. I go to the movies a lot. It’s dark. And I get to see what people are like. In this other movie-dream I’m carrying a woman and she’s screaming but she’s not really trying hard. I have legendary strength so I’m hopping from rock to rock, higher and higher. Below me, the villagers flow uphill like a river, yelling, waving torches. Old Van Helsing leads them, rood in his fist like a dagger. He has lines but doesn’t the English speak so well. Bug-eyed, throwing things at me—thump! thump!—and I’m zig-zagging...

So I know it’s those goddamn boys again, out there, throwing rocks at my shack. I sleep in the back: it’s light-proof there. I lever up onto one arm, blinking, not breathing, get to my feet, shake the dirt off, unbolt the door and ease it out an inch, shoulders up to my ears, as if I really am that cretin they’ve made of me: hunchback with one arm, half blind, goiter in my neck the size of a kidney. A former convict, a skitz free of some madhouse, *known* to have sex with animals—how people talk! Odd, this disposition toward making stories

up. I fear rivers of torch-bearing peasants, Van Helsing not the English speaking so well, and get boys with brains like corn smut, that foamy gray fungus that grows on corn, black inside like crushed charcoal wrapped in pond scum? Brains like that. Whose side is Nature on? But it's human to hate the ones you've hurt, or so I've read.

Then a rock comes through the front window—right through a pane of glass I just stole from someone's house!

"Hey, One-arm!" I wait, listening. What can I do? Those boys have always been out there. I've always been inside.

I clench, unclench my fists. Jags of glass, like pieces of surprise, lie on the floor, shiny with curved triangular reflections. The broken window might be the top of a well as seen by the water. (I am deep, the last cold fish uncaught. I think parenthetically, shrink everything toward poetry, a rabbit run helpless, raging, thirsty as white-hot flames but still dreaming, hating without end, losing to the closing credits and the disappointing rescue of that witless woman.) Framed in the window, blunt as a turnip, drunk as a pig, grunting with two of his friends:

"Come out, you fuckin' fuck!"

Dunkel ist das Leben. Yes, and heavens to Betsy. Somewhat like an oracle, I laugh.

AFTER ALL, I AM DEAD IF I GO OUT BUT THEY ARE DEAD IF THEY come in. My patient silence might persuade them, *brave* them in. In old country, I would break dem on de vheels of dere own vagon—full of turnips, I recall, big pithy ones horses wouldn't eat. I slouch to the window, wincing at the light. One frame is patched, the cardboard punctured. Pressing one eye to the puncture, my shack is a pinhole camera and I am the film. Three boys, shirttails out, stoop to pick rocks from the ditch. One has a bottle by its neck; a cigarette toggles as he talks. Someone chased a fly across his face with an ice pick. Their leader is a brute with close-set silver eyes, a mouth like an incision. He likes himself. But Number Three, shivering to one side, showing his teeth, seems nervous. Hasn't thrown any rocks but *he's* the one with a mouthful of black responsibility.

His guilt is mysterious. Tasting his brains? Tasting the charcoal grains in the corn smut that have fallen right into his mouth, and he doesn't like the grit of pure meanness? Or he's seen the white butcher's paper stuck to my porch: *Go awaY i live hear!!!* I had to put it up to stop kids from using my shack for a place to smoke their

dope: that might have been convenient but I'd rather not take too many this close to town. Nevertheless, that sign begs, makes me locally present in ways that call such morons here. Their big car sits like a safe in the middle of the lane NOT PLOWED OR SANDED IN WINTER. They expect me to run out, choking back tears? (*Please! Oo! Whimper!*) Watching through the cardboard puncture, I suck one long curved tooth and a tiny wind moves inside me, stirring flakes of rust.

Thump! Hey now that's my *car*! I almost yell. Then one squeals: "Stop!"

Right. They don't have the villagers with them on this. We're not that far off the highway and the lane out front does carry police cars past now and then.

Talk strays back and forth. I listen. My eye smarts with squinting. I rub it, sit with my back to the wall. Doors clamp shut, the starter sneezes. The big car rolls away on slowly crackling gravel. I comb my hair with my fingers and shut both eyes, pace the front room, hitch up my trousers, bend sharply to peer at the color-dead snarl of weeds, naked trees irradiated rather than illuminated by the overcast. Any mouse would creep out to estimate the damage but I go back to my room, bolt the door and sink to the floor of loose dirt, staring up at a blank black ceiling, dead movie screen, their sticks and stones having evoked more than just turnips: the horsy clip-and-a-clop of a coach-and-four on a thin lane bothered by moonlight. Cleft horse rumps, squeak of leather, clank of white iron, the sable on her riding coat. Mom.

WHAT WOULD NORMALLY BRAID SPACE, TIME AND SELF INTO REVERIE stirs me to all fours. I try changing into a wolf but it's never worked before. Sleep is finished. I pull on my warm coat, tie on boots, hide under a hat, a billed black one: *same shit, different day*. But when I see how light it is still I take a seat in my waiting room. What can I do? They should pave superhighways to my door, surround me with literary agents, bodyguards, other suckholes—throw wide the blood banks! *Living-Impaired Man Found!* But I resist. In my shack by a swamp, I resist *Astounding Interview*:

Both parents, yes.

You mean you were born...

Dead, exactly.

How do you spend a normal day?

I tip my head to one side and snore. The interviewer pulls out a rood like a dagger. I run through a field of snow-clotted pasture toward trees, Van Helsing leaning from his back porch, eyes bugging out. Vot mean? My black horse hates me on its back but I feel the first faint threads of heat uncoiling toward me. With fists full of mane, I hunch like a Cossack and dig in my heels. The horse tries to throw me. "Gallop!" I tell it. "Run!" It whirls beneath me, whinnying. "Hie on! Beat it!" Every joint pulling as it pitches me. "Mush!" I can't remember how to *start* one! Beaming seraphim part the clouds, bringing out the day while I, on my screaming horse, die for want of the right command. "Push off, Dobbin!" Doesn't hear me. Old McHelsing runs in with hammer and spike—he won't be cheated again! "*Giddy-up!*" The abracadabra works, the hooves hit the ground and we're off. I throw a white look at the sun singing up like the angels who know they're always right, all heaven and nature against me *but I just might make those trees!*

"Who's *there!*"

I stand, digging out both ears. I look around. It's darker in the front room, quiet as haystacks. I cough into one fist, breaking the silence, then open my hand and observe, philosophically, flakes of rust.

THEY DENTED THE HOOD.

A stone the size of my head lies in bent grass below the broken grill, an older injury. Opening the mouth of my iron hippopotamus, I jiggle wires, pinch bolts, pluck fiber belts, let the hood down. What can I do? It'll run or it won't. A crow laughs. Overcast sky like ocean, tan and ochre weeds, black trees, worthless borderland between two towns. In a dead elm a hawk, folded to a shield, glares.

The Buick headlights bleach the weeds, cut veiny white trees on the sky. Dials set in the dashboard glow green. One red needle leans on E. We shudder onto the lane NOT PLOWED OR SANDED IN WINTER, high beams rushing bats through the trees, over the shack. A hard right, a harder left over the embankment then across the tracks. Straight ahead, a mill. Big white lights shoot down on six cars facing the rails. The night shift. I stop by a van, cut lights and motor. Through a hose the Buick siphons gas from the van as I crouch, watching, smelling sweet gasoline, horses letting dung on a thin lane bothered by moonlight. Clanking iron talks to creaking leather. In the coach, I nuzzle the sable collar—

"Beat it!"

I stop, listen, then give my head a shake, give the hose another pull, give another wild look around.

COUNTRY ROADS SLIP IN AND OUT OF TOWNS THAT I'LL AVOID TILL the bars give up. On dark wavy hills houses drift by, isolated, scooting past as if afraid of me. Cold air gushes through the car. I love to ride at night! It has the unruffled constancy of youth, all flow, a predator's prowl. I dial through static and music and sources indicating studies show more will die. Same noise, different night. I recall the horse of my sitting-up dream, the carriage of my reverie, and casually note the slip of time that has put me in this Buick. I'd rather have a horse. Dark was dark then, villagers cowered...

Without headlights, I take a dirt lane through woods and stop by a dump—kitchen stove gaping like a burnt house, the herring bones of an inner spring mattress, an old TV's shattered shriek. No cars yet so I try a quarry where I took two high school kids whose blood kept me fat for a year. (I froze it in jars in the creek.) Parked under crabapple trees, I go along a gully, through a stand of pine. The quarry opens out in terraces tufted with pigweed, cratered with puddles. Zip. And I have no money for a movie.

That priest got away, I remember.

Steam clouds my face, like steam at the nostrils of a horse.

I rode out into the lightning and rain, shrieking after that priest—I would make him lick the blood from my hands then crush his head, make the eyes pop! But the rain falls off, the clouds tear apart, bright yellow blades of sunlight sweep after me, drive me on horseback into a stand of pine. Cloaked, a scarf across my face, I watch sunlight streak like lasers through the needles, feel it carve on my back. The day is clear as water on a microscope slide. I've never seen such light! The green of emeralds and jade, blue of turquoise, sapphire, copper sulfate.

Along the road comes a wagonload of turnips. Three *muzhiki* in coarse trousers, muddy boots, shirts tied around with sashes. Laughing, passing a jug, in no great hurry to get anywhere. One of them happens to see my shape in the shadows and bids the others look. The fellow with the reins draws them up. The swaybacked threadbare creature pulling them stumbles to a stop. They speak among themselves, squinting, shrugging, mulling it over, sucking the jug. The driver throws his head back (stumpy teeth black at the roots) and yells, "You! Come out where we can see you!"

Sure. My stand of pine, surrounded by sunlit fields, seems to have grown there expressly to serve as my cage. I hope they'll argue over whether or not I'm real, blame me on the jug and leave. But my horse, till then drawn up to watch them, lowers its nose to the rusty needles, snuffing for grass, and gives me away.

"Hey—what are you doing back in there, screwing yourself?" His fellows laugh, his chest puffs out. The younger, softer-looking one tells the others I am better left alone but the driver won't have it. "Come out where I can see you!"

"Why does he hide?" says the third. Big greedy eyes like boiled eggs. "He's a robber, he might have money."

"Who are you—why do you hide in there!"

"Enough!" I warn. "Move along or there's trouble in it for you!"

"He's important," says the youngest. "We should leave him."

"He's a Jew." The driver sways, lifts one cheek and farts. "Why else would he hide? What have you stolen, who have you killed!"

Not a puff of cloud in that sky. Sick with heat, I tell them I am *boyar*, that they are my serfs and should show respect. "Screw you!" They throw turnips, even the young one. It's all I can do to keep my horse from bolting. "Come out, come out!" I weep: my lovely mother, her ashes scattered; my sister sealed in a tomb—why not me as well! But they stop pitching turnips. "He doesn't come out." They discuss it; legends come to them: "He's *trapped* in there!" Excitement and fear form a plan. "Bloodsucker! We'll come back with a priest!" Lashed, the worn-out donkey stumbles forward, turnips tumbling to the road. They'll be an hour to the village, another hour back. Maybe they'll sober up, lose their nerve. I wait in the pines. The blood pounds in my head. I climb down to sit under my horse. Hours pass: three, four, I can't tell. At last the oblate orange sun melts into the hills. I lead my horse to the road, swooning in the brilliance still left to the day but gain the saddle and ride toward home.

It's still quite light when I meet a contingent led by a square-bearded priest, lesser elders, an officer on horseback, townsmen on foot and my three *muzhiki*. I tell them I've been out of the province. They assume I have travelled under sun, dark clothing shut to a nonexistent chill. I bear the crest of my ancient family, embroidered in scarlet and gold (*Same Shit, the Day is Ours!*) and bear my station with assurance. Their priest (not the one I was after) doubtfully fingers his gobby gold cruciform but stops when I calmly gaze at it. Apologies mumbled, forelocks tugged. The officer edges toward the

trio, hand on the haft of his sword. Ill as I am with sun and heat, speechless with the shocking loss of mother and sister to the methods of these animated onions, I face them with the damp satisfaction of knowing that now, on the road, the sun safely down, I have nothing to fear. I loosen my scarf, remove my broad-brimmed hat, fan myself. Strength returns like a hard-on. Yes, I had met my tormentors on the road. They threw turnips at me, chased me into some trees. Seems they wanted money. I stand from my horse, tugging at my gloves, waiting on their judgement as though it couldn't possibly matter.

The two who did the braying are questioned, caught out on mismatched facts and arrested on the road. In time I order them broken on the wheel, but the youngest I pardon then and there. Flattering him with a chance to study abroad and make a name for himself, I bid the lad follow me home, bolt the doors and fasten my mouth to his throat.

AMBER WINDOWS GLOW THROUGH TREES ALONG THE STREET. Street lamps hang in the branches like stars brought close. It seems as if the twigs are spun around the lamps, iridescent nests of light shifting as I drive toward a bright central square of closed shops and an eating place and three fine churches: two brick forts and one white barn with a rocket spire. Two bars, one wedged between buildings with flat roofs, bracketed eaves, the other a gothic silliness lording it over a parking lot.

The street goes funny, meets no others, bends around a stucco church for low Episcopalians and passes more houses straining light through lace curtains. To the left a cemetery fills a quarter of the block I've just come around. Edging an embankment that raises the burial ground three feet above the cracked, buckled sidewalk is a black wrought-iron fence. I wonder: Does it work? Markers, granite obelisks, the rutted trunks of giant trees stand within.

I ease up to the curb, close the car, slide through shadows along the fence. The grass around the graves needs cutting. Its dew soaks my trousers, the hem of my coat. Fog makes the streetlamps flare; through the low-hanging bows of huge trees, misty box-blades of light shift and change as I walk. I love to look at light! It has the attraction of terror, sin. It makes flowers bloom? (No, plastic. I poke its wire back into the ground.)

I stop to take a leak between a small house and the weeds where

the fence fades into the ground. In a bright room a middle-aged man at an easel (not my notion of an artist: short with a round tummy, spectacles, receding gray hair) sketches an attentively seated girl. His walls are a battle of books. He strikes the paper with quick charcoal strokes, speaks to the girl, who nods. Smooth shiny brown hair hangs between her shoulders. I watch them, thinking of that sister I'd never had, that priest who buried her alive. The sketch is nearly done. Mother is called in to laud the likeness.

I could scream at the likeness.

I stand like a broken-down horse, chewing my lip.

THE BUICK GRUMBLES AND CARRIES ME AWAY FROM THE CURB TO the edge of the village and the last bar in it. On a bleak gravel lot fading off a side street, which itself fades into an impasse of run-down two-story houses, dozens of cars nose up to the bar. I take a space among them, leave my hat and coat behind but keep on blazer and scarf. In a pocket I have some change, a few bills (spoils of some old killing), for a beer for the sake of appearances. Beneath the glub-glub music and bleeping electronic games inside I hear a cold sweet gush of water where concrete steers the creek toward my swamp, my shack. Fog drapes the valley, muffling sound; my footfalls, first on gravel, then concrete, fall hollow, isolated, clocklike, in my own ears especially portentous ('cause I'm so *cool!*)

Passing through the door is like entering a den of thieves. No one likes a stranger, source of all fiction. I'm taller than most of them, thin as an Ayn Rand hero, Russian-dancer's eyes, a merciless mouth—I see it in the mirror behind rows of future dead soldiers, my black hair thick and shiny, forehead high and square as a scholar's, the black scarf serving my head as on a pillow.

At the bar I order a beer and pay for it with a dollar, smoothing it flat with long leathery fingers. I like these gloves. I stole them, of course. Try living on nothing but the dread you inspire and see how far it takes you these days. Think of all the things you'd have to do, by day, among people, just to *arrange* living by night—and never mind living well. You'd have to write pornography or sell by phone or do something at night, somewhere else—something nearly, if not in fact, subterranean, and *not* coal mining, the point being to stay alive. Getting a night job is almost impossible without a daylight interview, except perhaps for driving cabs, but what if you had to go in, to whatever job, by day—just once but for some crucial purpose having

to do with keeping the job? You'd find, if you hadn't already, that with a job and money comes Newton's equal and opposite reaction: your time belongs to others, and if they say: "Hop, Toad," you hop. And if you need a car for hopping to and from your job, assuming you've found one after being fired from the first, you might conceivably buy it after sundown. But could you license it? You can't always count on the dark cloudy day for getting to the motor vehicle department. I've tried to think and, at times, shoulder my way through the multiple cooperations all flesh is not merely heir to but which are entailed upon it. To live in society you must submit to its rules, even if you prey on it. (Ask any gangster who takes the Fifth.) If you try to avoid them all, placing yourself as far from people as possible, you must go that much farther when you need to drink one—again by car and, if unregistered and unlicensed, you run the risk of arrest and, of course (always) accidents. So you live closer to them. And they press you. They note your eccentricities, shun you, tell weird tales. Boys come to your shack and stone it. So again you try to pass as one of them, because you want to live, and at some level of comfort above indigence. Requires money. Requires that you work for, and almost always with, other people. Requires that you conform to their schedules. While being pleasant. While not smiling. Any average writer can get *One Like Myself* around these and other obstacles but in life no one gets around them. Presidents do not get around them. The rich might—but then you become the eccentric recluse, victimized daily by the tabloid headline, the telephoto lens. And if you are rich, you are famous; and then you don't die... As to hirelings who go out to bring victims back, since you cannot yourself, since you are too rich and famous—not that you can't find them, but how far can they be trusted? So I live in a shack, sleep on dirt, drive a stolen car that takes gas from other cars. Occasionally, I steal something nice. These gloves.

Like a window on other lives, a television sits above a door leading into a storeroom; piled brown and white liquor boxes shape cold kitchen light. A frying smell hurries my inventory: the people are mostly young, not of good families, having a pale starved look or one that's coarse and corn-fed. Peasants. The type never varies. My beer arrives and then I see her at the end of the bar, in the incorporeal TV glow. Her elbows and hands rest on the bar; extended fingers touch the glass before her. A heart-shape face exaggerated by light and make-up, eyes that peep over high cheekbones. But a

certain bulldog toughness to the line of her jaw. Her mouth is wide and red and rude. Nice jugs, blue sweater. Auburn hair with curly bangs in front, smaller curls worked in all around. Eyes like slits, she gives her head a shake, as if coyly saying no, but the nearest man has his back to her, is thumbing shut a cigarette lighter. She sways, catches herself with a jerk. The eyes open, shut, the mouth makes a *moue*. An inveterate drunk, young and pretty, but no one pays the slightest attention.

I collect my change and wait in the car.

NOT QUITE AN HOUR DIES BEFORE SHE STEPS OUT, STOPS HER FALL with one stiff leg and finds the sleeves of her short wool coat. A cigarette falls from her lips, talked away. She leaves it on the sidewalk, sending up smoke.

I let her leave the lot then follow, lights off. On the highway, a gas station; she wanders past the pumps beneath an awning, stops to light up. I wait for the explosion but she staggers off. I follow, slowly pass and park on a side road going up a hill. I wait with lights off, motor running, hoping we won't pass out in a ditch, now will we? With my trunk key I ease out, set the door touch-closed, click the trunk off the catch, hide in the culvert.

Not a lot of cover. I set my teeth and harden.

Tick tock clip stumble clop— "What's it— Hey, fuck you!"

I sweep her up and shut her in the trunk.

Victory. Now tool down the highway. Laugh. Gloved fingers squeeze the wheel, flex. I haven't taken one from town in years. I hear thump double-thump then a blood-clotting scream. What can I do? I turn off and cross the creek, hurry uphill past shabby houses, dip in and out of the mill parking lot. Its lights are still on but the night shift cars are reduced to the van. On blocks. (Murderous Buick!)

Crossing the tracks, I cut the motor and coast down the lane NOT PLOWED OR SANDED IN WINTER. In the rolling light I see no cars near the creek but cut the lights and stop in the weeds. Thump. Thump. Sister in her sepulchre: the parallel does not escape me. I must let her out. She'll be scared sober, difficult. First I run to the front door, grope for the locked iron bolts, run hat and coat into the back room, run back out. Through the fog I hear the creek. A silence like haystacks. A couple in a parked car, hearing the first cries of protest, could spell my sudden end so I start that way. A muffled moan

stops me.

The trunk-lid yawns. I push her down, climb in.

"I'll do it, what you want."

I taste tears, follow them to soft wool bunched at her throat. Skin. Bliss. I open wide and puncture the pounding carotid, gaining her weight by a pint. Still drawing, my neck near breaking with the strain, I lift her out, use her rump to shut the trunk then carry her into the shack. One door, two, and I settle to hump the blood out of her and into my bones.

It's like one blind date after another, but this time she's drunk. I get started, then I can't stop. Suck her right down! All about me, that tangible nothing called balance tilts, lurches up, keels over. I roll off, near to splitting my smooth, full trousers, sleeves shrunk to my elbows, like a man-shape balloon, my skin shiny and pink as licked candy, so sick I would drag myself to the road, wait for sunrise and die a flaming wreck. But I can only lie belly-up like a dead frog, gurgling like a sewer, pig-drunk, watching the villagers waving torches, old Van Helsing, that priest, those peasants and goddamn boys, my sister, mother, nurse—that witless damsel, *all* my dear good friends...

Action! ♣

Honorable Mention
On Spec Short Story Contest

Just a Passenger

Robyn Herrington

I'M JUST A PASSENGER.

I didn't ask to be picked up. Didn't want it. It only ever crossed my mind while I waited in line at the supermarket with my wife.

Molly would hum and arrange the groceries on the black conveyor belt and I'd read the tabloid headlines. Not the stuff about the royal family, the latest Hollywood marriage to go in the dumpster or how best to lose weight this week. I'd read the *other* stuff: "Man Abducted by Flying Saucer. Held For 27 Days," "Third Headless Body Found. Satanic Cult?" "Cows Mutilated. Farmers Blame Aliens." Bad black and white composite pictures of wide-eyed, gray beings, swollen heads on waif-like bodies, standing over partly butchered cows.

Then it happened, like I'd seen on television. I was driving home, late at night, the country road pretty well deserted—just me and the occasional luminescent stare of a coyote. I was happily listening to the soft rock on the radio, humming along with Clapton. The radio went crazy, playing all the stations at once. The dash lights started flickering, and then the brightness came up from behind. My car

shuddered a few times, coughed and died.

Just like Frank.

I miss Frank. We used to have some pretty good talks, him and me, about all sorts of things—he had a good head on his shoulders. The first week after they took me, I just about pounded fists into putty, trying to break out. Frank kept at me, telling me it wasn't any use, saying how he'd done everything he could to get away—but hell, even if we did get away, where could either of us go? I didn't listen, not right away.

I did get away from them, once. Wasn't too difficult—it's like they didn't expect me to up and run. They took me out of my room, out to the main corridor, and I just broke away. I figured they'd follow, but they didn't, and I managed to get away from them, ducking through doors and winding down corridors.

I ran for a good thirty minutes, I figured, before I stopped to listen. I didn't hear a damn thing except for some thrumming noise coming from the walls. Figured probably the hum of the ship's engines, and didn't think more about it. I saw a grate in the floor, not too far away from me, and yanked on it until it opened. I slipped in, crouched low, and hunched my way along, under some sort of duct work.

I stayed there for a long time, hunched over, listening, heart hammering so hard I could feel it in my temples.

I heard footsteps, occasionally, but no one ever thought to look for me. Guess maybe I wasn't quite important enough.

I got thirsty, first. Then a while later, I got hungry. I had to relieve myself in a corner, embarrassed even though there was no one around to see but me. I just didn't do things like that, and Molly, she would've had a fit if she'd known.

My throat got so dry that I couldn't swallow without almost gagging. The thrumming wormed its way into my mind, boring a hole and getting louder and louder and louder...

They took a few days to find me, and when they did, I was almost out of my mind and more relieved to see them than I should've been. When they took me back to my room, I heard Frank say, "I told you so. Even if you get away from them, where can you go?" That time, damn me, I listened.

Frank used to have the room next to mine. Room. Cell. Whatever. It's nothing but a flat mattress and blanket for a bed and a small hole in the metal floor I've been using for a toilet. The walls are clearer

than glass and harder than rock. All in all, pretty damn remarkable.

But I was talking about Frank.

Frank was drunk out of his mind when they got him, he said, birthday-suit naked in a small boat in the middle of a lake in the dead of night.

Frank's from Manitoba. Lots of lakes in Manitoba, he said, good places for walleye. Said he had no luck that night, couldn't land a single fish so he downed a dozen cold ones and threw his clothes over the side of his boat. He said when the lights split the darkness and hovered over him, he wept like a baby and thought that Jesus had come to take him home.

Frank and I were neighbors for three weeks. Every day, they'd come and take us out. Frank never said what they did with him. He'd half-shrug and say, "Nothing much. You?"

They play games with me. Mostly Trivial Pursuit. I say the answers out loud, and they make words form in my head. They're good at the game. Real good. Personally, I think they're cheating, but what can I do about it? I'm just a passenger.

About a week ago, Frank started coughing. He shivered a lot, couldn't get warm no matter how much they jacked up the heat or piled on the blankets. I worried that maybe I'd get it too, that the invisible walls wouldn't keep out what was making Frank so sick.

One night, I couldn't sleep—not with Frank doubled over, coughing his lungs up onto the metal floor. I sat against the wall, watching him, wishing there was something I could do, wishing I could help. I was thinking, *Frank's dying, Frank's really dying*—and there they were. I don't know if they can read minds. Sometimes it seems they can.

If they can, they know the kind of death I wish for them.

Four of them stood outside our cells, watching. Just watching. I said, *Do something*. Then I yelled it when Frank stopped coughing and lay on his face, wheezing bubbly breaths. When Frank spasmed and jerked, I called them bastards, begged them to help him, threatened to stretch their scrawny little necks from here to tomorrow if they didn't just *Jesus Christ Please Do Something!*

They did. They watched.

With one final, body-wracking cough, Frank died.

I sat slack-jawed, my heart thumping in my chest, looking at Frank's face with his staring eyes, thinking, *God Almighty, Frank's dead*. Then, one of those sonsobitches opened a panel on the wall and

wiped his skinny hand across the lit surface. I saw a hatch open in Frank's cell. Then, I heard a sucking noise, and Frank's body slid out to God only knows where. Just like that. Whoosh. Gone. That's all it took.

I talk to them all the time, figuring if they get to know me, maybe they'll let me go. I can't fight my way out, but maybe I appeal to their —their *what*, I don't know. So, I tell them about Molly. We've been married for seven years, and had never been apart more than a couple of days. I tell them about our house and how we like to go hiking on the weekends, usually up to the mountains. I tell them about snow and about ice fishing. I tell them about our dog, Chester, and his nervous stomach, and how Molly hates to drive in the winter, how Molly hates to be alone. So you see, I tell them, you have to let me go. You *have* to.

Been telling them that each and every day since they grabbed me. They blink at me, lids sliding sideways across those darker than black eyes. I'm tired of this ride, and I want to get off. But I don't know how. I'm just their damned passenger.

I HAVE TWO NEW NEIGHBORS. HE TOLD ME HIS NAME WAS GREG and that hers is Sara. For three days they've been in Frank's old cell, and Sara is still crying. I asked how long they'd been married, and Greg smiled an odd smile.

Not married, he said. Barely knew Sara at all. They'd been driving around together when they got taken. I asked where they'd been headed. He didn't answer.

I'M SUPPOSED TO PLAY SOME CRAZY LABYRINTH BOARD GAME. I'M supposed to find the treasure, they're supposed to stop me. Flip the cards over, move the game piece. I don't feel much like playing, so I fold my arms and slide down in the chair. Kinda childish, but I don't really give a rat's ass.

Then a funny thing happened.

They spoke, and the words sounded different, like I could actually hear them. And they didn't bug me about not playing the game.

"Tell us about Greg."

I asked why. Didn't expect a response and didn't get one. Made me curiouiser than hell, though. Why'd they want to know about him?

Made me worried, too.

What if I wasn't interesting anymore? Made me wonder if they'd kill me, maybe leave me in my room to starve, or if I'd be sucked away like Frank. I sat on my cold floor, thinking about what I should do.

I told Greg.

"They asked me about you," I said.

He didn't say anything for a long time. He stood there, arms folded, resting his head against the clear wall, hair flat against his forehead. Didn't know if he'd even heard me.

Finally he said, "What'd you tell them?"

I had nothing to tell them, and said so.

Greg nodded, then folded his arms. "Good. Let 'em worry."

"Worry about what?" I asked.

Greg shrugged one shoulder and folded his arms. "Nothin'." He turned and whispered something to Sara. I don't know what he said, but for the first time, she took her hands away from her face.

Two days later, they gave Greg his own cell, and Sara stopped crying.

SCRABBLE HAS TO BE MY LEAST FAVORITE GAME IN THE WORLD. Playing with Molly was like playing with a brown-eyed, giggling dictionary. She could conjure words out of the crappiest tiles, real words—not made up ones like I tried to get away with. Whenever I played, I always got stuck with more vowels than I knew what to do with. Never one S so that I could get an easy score.

"Tell us about Greg."

I flipped my tiles over. Damn. Three As, two Ns, a G and an I. I added "ing" to their "FALL." Not much of a word, but it got me a few points. "What?"

"His mind is closed."

Three tiles: an E, a T and a W. "What do you mean?" I felt something from them, something like confusion, something like fear.

"He's different."

That I could easily agree with. Sara was scared to death of him. "Yes," I said. "He most assuredly is."

"What can we learn from him?"

I shrugged. "I don't know." Then, a thought. "What do you think you can learn from me?"

They didn't answer. They took me back to my cell.

SARA'S A GOOD-LOOKING GIRL. PRETTY, NOW THAT HER EYES aren't swollen from crying. Young, I'd guess around twenty. She won't look across to where Greg's cell is. If anything, she keeps her eyes on me. Yesterday they took her and brought her back after I don't know how long. She hasn't said a word yet. Just stares at the floor or stares at me. I keep telling her everything's going to be all right.

I don't know why.

"I'M GETTING OUT."

I looked up from dinner, a plate of tacky brown stuff that looks and smells like some kind of jerky. A bit sweeter than jerky, less salty. Pale, stringy. Meat, I think.

Greg had his face pressed against the wall again. "I am," he said. "I'm getting out."

From behind me, I heard Sara whimper.

Greg laughed. "Don't worry," he said, voice velvety soft and sing-song. "I don't want you. I don't want you, not anymore."

I pushed my plate aside and thought of what Frank had said to me. "If you get out, where the hell can you go?" Talking was more interesting than wondering where the food came from. Or worse, *what* it was.

Greg shrugged. "Don't know. But they watch me," he said, breath misting on the clear wall. "They're interested in me. You've seen 'em."

Yeah, I had. They did watch Greg. Seemed fascinated with him. They huddled, foreheads almost touching, and I could feel a buzzing inside my skull. Whispering.

"I'm interested in them, too. They'll let me out. You wait. You wait and see."

I DID WAIT. I WAITED TWO WHOLE DAYS. I WAITED AND WATCHED while Greg paced back and forth in his cell, sometimes muttering, sometimes yelling. He started to pull his hair out in clumps. They would come and watch and huddle and make their mental notes.

A ROOM, AND IN THE MIDDLE, ONE CHAIR. I SAT DOWN.

"So fellas," I said, "where's the game?"

"What is he?" one asked.

"Who?" I said, even though I knew who.

“Greg. What is he?”

I shrugged. “Human. Like me.”

I jumped, screaming. The chair bit into me with a thousand needles. I tried to claw my way out of it, but couldn’t. The surface was sticky, as though it had fused to my skin.

“What is he?”

I told them again, said he was human. Again, the chair tore through my body, separating flesh from bone. Can’t remember when I last cried like that, and all the time, they asked me about Greg.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, HON?”

I opened my eyes and looked into Molly’s beautiful face. She had worry wrinkles pinching the bridge of her nose, and her hand felt cool against my cheek.

“What did they do to you? Are you all right?”

I woke up on the floor of my cell, body burning. Sara stared at me, face wrinkled, worried.

“Are you all right?” she whispered.

Her voice, not Molly’s. Damn. I tried to tell her no, but my words came out as a groan.

“He’s gone,” she said. “They took him when they brought you back, about an hour ago.”

I swallowed, feeling my throat scratch. I’d screamed it raw.

“They left you some water,” Sara said.

I nodded and pushed myself up on my elbows. I lifted the small bottle to my lips and took a sip. Wasn’t going to take a mouthful, not all at once. Couldn’t be sure that it was water. They’d never tricked me before, but then, they’d never hurt me before.

I wanted them so very dead.

The water was cool and I felt it flow all the way into my stomach. I looked at Sara and managed a smile.

She sat back on her knees and shoved her hair from her face.

“What are they going to do to him?”

Couldn’t manage a shrug, so I shook my head a little.

“I hope they kill him,” she said. “I hope they kill him, like he was going to kill me.”

I opened my mouth to speak. I had to force my vocal cords to work. “What?”

She nodded and sniffed. “Yeah. He was going to kill me. He told me he was. Damn it,” she said, shaking her head, shoving one hand

through her tangled hair, "I knew I shouldn't have been hitch-hiking."
 "Hitch-hiking?"

She nodded again. "He smiled when I climbed in, said he could take me as far as Toronto. I said great. It was starting to sleet and I didn't want to walk anymore. Then he grabbed me. He took out a knife and grabbed my neck. He said he'd kill me if I didn't do as he wanted."

When I found out what Greg wanted, I pretty much wanted to kill him myself. I told Sara I was sorry. Wondered if my words sounded as hollow to her as they did to me.

"He said he'd done it before, done it and got away with it. He said he had all the heads buried in his basement." After a moment, she added, "If they kill him, I'll be happy."

I didn't think she would be. Not really. Perhaps not ever again.

GREG DIDN'T COME BACK, BUT THEY DID. THEY CAME, FINGERS curling and uncurling. I wondered what that could mean, until the feeling hit.

Afraid. They were afraid.

"Where is he?" one asked.

I moved away from the wall. "I don't know." I wasn't in the chair now, thought they couldn't hurt me. But I wasn't sure.

"Have you seen him?"

I said no, I hadn't. I asked them how he got away. They didn't say.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN I FELL ASLEEP. IT WAS SOMETIME WHILE I WAS thinking about Molly and how her hair smelled in the morning. It was a nice memory. A sad one, too. My eyes felt gritty, and I knew I'd cried.

Then something woke me. Wasn't sure what it was at first, almost like a memory I could hear. Something...

Screams.

Not out loud. In my head. One of them was screaming.

I blinked a few times and sat up. Sara was still sleeping. She hadn't been with them as long as I had, wasn't as used to the ways they worked. She didn't hear them like I did.

I listened for a while, trying to find a way to describe the noise. Closest I could come was a horrible, strangled mewling, like a cat makes when it's in pain. Greg came in after a while, eyes wide and the biggest smile on his face that I'd ever seen. In his hand he carried

something gray and flabby. I just about gagged when I saw it was another hand—one of their hands.

"It's great," he said, his words bubbling with bottled up laughter. He slid the hand over the wall panel, and my cell opened up. So did Sara's. "Man, you have no idea. It's so great."

"What is?"

"Hunting them. Catching them." He wiped one hand over his sweaty face, and then he did laugh. "Killing them. You know, they don't die the way you would. You," he said, pointing at my neck, "you'd bleed all over. Red over white shirt over blue jeans. You, I'd cut your head off with one neat slice," and he ran his thumb across the front of his throat. "But them. Neck's all sinew and bone. But not their bodies, no. No ribs at all. Not even a heart ... but I found something small and round, and when you pull it out, they die just the same." Greg nodded as he talked, smiling. "Sticky blood. Looks like warm molasses. Puny arms and legs. Snap like dried-out chicken bones. Hey, why don't you come out and join the party?"

I didn't know what to say.

He looked over his shoulder quickly, then back to me. "Seven altogether. Always liked lucky seven. I found a couple up front, driving this thing."

"They'll catch you," I said.

Greg shrugged. "They already tried," and he chuckled, "but I know how to hide better than they know how to look. I know how to keep still, how to breathe no more than a whisper of air." He looked over his shoulder again, licked his lips. "I've been watching them, and they don't see me. Funny. You'd think they'd be able to track me, find me using some gizmo, but they just seem confused by it all." He smiled. "You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna kill 'em, all but one, and then, then, I'm gonna make that one take us home. You can help," he said, gesturing to the open door with the flabby hand.

I moved back. "I'm not so sure..."

Greg ran at me and shook the gray hand in my face. "Listen, you'll love it. The way their skin bunches up under my fingers when I squeeze, the way their eyes blink open and close, even the way they smell, they're sweeter than any Sara could ever be. Way sweeter." He looked over his shoulder again and waggled his eyebrows up and down. "She," he said, "was something to do. Something to pass the time. But this? This is fun."

BY MY COUNT, THERE'S ONLY TWO OF THEM LEFT. IT'S BEEN THREE days and I've almost gotten used to the noise of cats wailing. Almost. Sara talks to me when she's awake, jabbering nervously, or sleeps in dream-filled, thrashing jags. She hasn't moved from her open cell. She tells me she feels safer inside than outside where Greg is.

And me? Damn me, I'm doing the same. I sit and stare, knowing I can get up, anytime, and walk out. But do *what*? There's something outside, now, worse than they could ever be.

So I'm waiting. Waiting, and wondering.

Greg's going to do what he says he's going to do: kill them all but one. And then what? What if we get home again, with Greg on the loose? Worse yet, what if we *don't*? They had to come from somewhere, a place filled with little bodies of molasses blood, that have arms and legs that crack like dried chicken bones. I know that. Lord help us if Greg figures that out, too. He'll change whatever's in that mind of his, and we'll all be gone. No more hiking in the clean air. No more ice fishing. No Chester. No Molly.

And damn me, there's nothing I can do.

God help me. I'm still just a passenger. 🍁

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Seeing 2001

Steve Mohn

WE DROVE HOME THROUGH FOG MADE SILVER by the headlights, a thick screen on which I kept projecting *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We had been to a theater, but I was remembering how it had been when I was younger, watching *The Guns of Navarone* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Ben Hur*, *Zulu* and *West Side Story*, and other Big Pictures thrown onto the sky at drive-ins, the screens huge, the movies as hot as dreams and sharply more real, so that scenes from some of them had equal weight with flecks of dreams and early memories, themselves like bits of film.

Dealing with the fog, perhaps thinking that Kubrick had tricked him, Dad said, "I guess someone will tell me what *that* was all about some day."

In film school, where *2001* took me some years later, it surprised

me that my love of the film, and respect for Stanley Kubrick, prompted smiles from the faculty, and from certain of the more “knowing” students, who didn’t approve of Kubrick either. They had a solid double-standard behind the attitude. He was an American maverick who, unlike Orson Welles, worked regularly and within the studio system. He was an expatriated New Yorker. He was not yet dead. And with *2001* he had made a film that was passionately, seriously, science fiction, not an “arty” film—like *Alphaville*, wearing science fiction like a fleece—but in fact an obvious and rigorous work of film *art*.

A film that didn’t tell you what to think but asked you to think about what you had seen. One in which two full reels, twenty minutes, passed before that nice lady in the elevator offered the first words. A motion picture that relied, as few films do, on motion and pictures. The conductor George Szell once pointed out that people in concert halls listen to music with their eyes; in the same way, too many people watched *2001* with their ears. This has a further ironic parallel.

In *Analyzing Prose*, Richard A. Lanham said that since Aristotle’s time, we have “confused evaluative judgements with descriptive ones,” telling how we feel about a piece of writing by declaring it sincere or stolid or weak, but rarely describing, in rhetorical terms, what the prose does or how it does it: “How often have you heard someone talk about a hypotactic nominal style which frequently uses alliterative isocolon?” (Lanham, vii). Probably not often. And when we talk about film, we make the same mistake, detailing our reactions to what we have seen only after briefly, if at all, describing it. By *description* I do not mean plot synopsis. I mean that as you watched the film, what, aside from pictures of actors talking, did you *see*? What was in the frame? How was it lit? Composed? Did the camera move or not move and how did it usually move?

Of course, the problem with asking *2001* the kind of questions you ask of a painting or a poem is that paintings and poems are serious and SF is a literature, and a cinema, for kids young and old and, usually, male—a write-off unless the “right” people (Jean Luc Goddard, Margaret Atwood, the people who coughed-up *Gattica*) are involved. SF is usually judged as a content, a subject, a noun, even by people in the field.

The director of *Dr. Strangelove* had done SF before and would again with *A Clockwork Orange*. Anthony Burgess’s reputation as a stylist

had let him avoid the corral of SF so that he could gambol in the pasture of style and ideas. (So did Ayn Rand avoid seeing *Atlas Shrugged* marked off, and shrugged off, as SF—or no fifty-thousand dollar advance!) Still I recall a general disdain for, and mistrust of, 2001 when it came out. At my first screening I heard a guy in back tell his pal, “I just came ’cause I heard the photography was great.”

Yes, actually, it was. Though I’m not sure anymore what people think they mean when they say that about some movie they’ve seen. A monolith owns this film’s imagery. But see how it has the same dimensions as the Super-Panavision screen ratio that contains it. This rectangle is visually echoed in the bay on the hub of the orbital wheel that accepts the shuttle, and in the bright blank walls of the lunar briefing room. The Lucite circuit blocks Dave keys out of HAL’s head are little monoliths of logic. And when we cut to HAL’s close-up we see a console inscribed with an upright rectangle, from which the eye of HAL stares like the lens of a camera, a second motif repeated in the sun, the space station wheel, the EVA pods and the fore end of the spacecraft *Discovery*, wherein the astronauts live and work upon a squirrel cage inducing the artificial *gravitas* of Mission—a geometry of circles-in-squares. So a really sharp maker, not wasting a word, keeps reminding you of the monolith that started the apes thinking of meat, murder and machinery. You never really stop seeing it. Nor do you ever stop seeing the circles: so the sun of the opening title sequence is echoed in HAL’s eye and in the oval pod windows, which echo the image of the starchild in his translucent caul.

And no movie has left its mark, pieces of its design, literal fingerprints on so many after-images. On *Silent Running*, directed by Douglas Trumbull after supervising 2001 special effects, but also on *Star Wars*, whose every frame is from some other source: as soon as you see those spacecraft career into view, you know who built them. The model work in every SF film since 1968 repeats the motif, as if a harrow had inscribed the exterior designs, losing the original point (spacecraft need not be aerodynamic) to get the hieroglyphic brontosaucers of *Independence Day*. Ditto the surface detail on the Death Star: all that lumpy conduit. Ditto the hokey *Lost in Space* ship, soup-can smooth in the series but, for the movie, acid-etched to bring up the now-expected *bas relief*. When Luke Skywalker lays his bet on the Force, his dive into the trough may remind you of formative cliffhanger moments from George Lucas’ youth, but it’s also a straight

steal from “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite”—Dave in the pod, a first-person in swift acceleration: I am a camera (eye)!

PRODUCTION DESIGN DRIVES SF FILM AS WORLD-BUILDING DRIVES the SF novel, and nothing is better at description than a movie camera—any leaf larger than the film grain is described. Still, most SF film design is flash. Ridley Scott’s *Alien* and *Blade Runner* are exceptions, and David Lynch’s steampunky *Dune*. Lynch began as a painter. But without the backstory from Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* does *Blade Runner* need that endless rain or that sun burning halos in the soy sauce of LA’s polluted sky? Those sterile living spaces in *2001*, though, could not be otherwise, given when they are in use and who engineered them. *Blade Runner* and *Alien* may owe their scruffy looks in part to feeling that they had to play against what Oswald Morris, lighting director on *Lolita*, called “the absolute crisp crystal clear clarity ... Kubrick and [cinematographer] Geoffrey Unsworth gave” *2001* (Campbell, 177).

Morris is talking about a high key, *low* contrast lighting scheme, high key and low key being slight misnomers. In high key, the ratio of key light to fill light might be 2 to 1, where 2 is the key. Low key light, common to thrillers, drops the shadows toward black: a thriller key-to-fill ratio might be 16 or 30 to 1. Most space movies are thrillers so lighting directors force the drama with contrasty schemes that lose the distinction between what’s *outside* the spacecraft (bright sun, black space) and what’s inside. *2001* interiors are high key low-contrast scenes but these are cut against the low key high-contrast exteriors. The cool and affectless Dave and Frank, who make their HAL 9000 seem helplessly sincere, fit these interiors, though that squirrel cage is a home too, where they eat, sleep, exercise, play chess, sketch and watch the news. Not for them the alien tentacle that must be forced back through the porthole or getting that flakey dilithium crystal to do its fantasy physics. So they get contrasty (read: danger) lighting when in full-pressure suits, when immersed in the insubstantial hazmat of raw vacuum, or in the pod, being lip-read by HAL, whose agenda won’t always include them.

2001 strove to be realist SF. It got the science right (remember the two *Lost in Space* cadets trapped outside when the “heat” of a comet welds shut the main hatch?) then got the look to fit the science.

And it will date when it starts to feel silly. It doesn’t yet. There is nothing like that lunar base, nor the orbital wheel where Dr. Floyd

has his archaic Cold War chat with sly Dr. Smislov. But from Low Earth Orbit to lunar base to Jupiter Mission, Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke drew a working orbital environment, the scale of which feels too big only because the arms race had been expected to go on driving the space race. Inflation was not yet a factor. If our current space shuttle is not quite up to what flies Dr. Floyd into orbit, there's no hardware reason why he couldn't videophone Kubrick's daughter from there. It might even cost the same.

ONE THING *2001* DID NOT SUCCESSFULLY PASS ON TO SF FILM WAS the silence of the vacuum. The curved-out Cinerama screen drew you in the more for Kubrick's refusal to infect the emptiness with noise. If there is one actuality a motion picture, by its nature, can convey about space, it is that it's quiet. Kubrick had the nerve, good sense and creative control to shoot exteriors without sound and *run* them that way, on the principle that what you heard was what you *would* hear. Could any other effect make the background stars feel so distant? Yet what SF picture since has taken the hint? *Apollo 13* dared parabolic orbits for zero-g effects and director Ron Howard had the clout to get what he wanted; but he must have figured that when people see rocket flame they gotta hear *whoosh!*

Everything on the soundtrack is distilled. You can easily memorize every spoken line. Isolated sounds—the in-suit breathing and hiss of the air mix; the electronic alarms at full pitch—further isolate the astronauts and are cut against Kubrick's now legendary temp track, created to suggest to composer Alex North (whose score was not used) what Kubrick had in mind. Before 1968, how many people had heard *Also Sprach Zarathustra* or knew which Strauss wrote it? Now used-car dealers run it. The sad serenity of deep-space flight is born on the strings of Aram Khachaturian's *Gayaneh (ballet): suite* that plays as *Discovery* grandly fills the screen and Frank jogs in the squirrel cage. The *Blue Danube* of Johann Strauss, of course, we knew, that being the point and its being a waltz. The choral work of György Ligeti was unfamiliar—but how else to meet the unfamiliar?

And it is all one glorious dance. The partners are the camera and what it is looking at. Throughout *2001*, the camera does not pan or tilt much. It tracks, as it often does in Kubrick. There's some unobtrusive handheld work among the apes (the thigh bone in the air is handheld) and at the lunar monolith site and when Dave makes his way to HAL's lair. The roughest handling comes in the pod, that mad

vibration. But you can imagine the camera never moving, or everything in front of it not moving and the camera turning, spinning, panning to follow. The zero-g effects are not confined to first-rate matte painting and tricks with wires—*2001* is itself buoyantly weightless. As it should be.

I was young when I first saw it. I've seen it at least a dozen times on screen, four times in video. On the occasion of his eighty-second birthday, Sir Arthur C. Clarke referred to the screening of Kubrick's "final (awesome!) version" of *2001* at London's National Film Theatre (Clarke, 73). That should be something to see. ♣

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“Alphabetia”

Aurothena

Catherine MacLeod

THE LAST VAMPIRE WAS IN GREAT DEMAND AT cocktail parties. She flashed her fangs demurely, and referred to herself as “fashionably late.”

Aurothena wasn't comfortable with the other celebrities, but drank their carefully-siphoned blood, and when they weren't looking, rubbed it into her hands like lotion. Their attempts to treat her like one of their own were simple good manners, she knew.

But she could fly into a sky full of cold stars. Be hit by lightning and not care. Her own were wherever the sun had sent them.

Aurothena mingled politely. Her companions were studies in cultivated ennui; intoxicated; afraid of going home alone. She held her tongue, thinking she had no right to comment. She admired her host's weary grace, and mourned the loss of her own.

There was nothing worse than a guest who just didn't know when to leave. 🍁

Believing

Catherine MacLeod

WILLIAM WENT TO THE WITCH SANDRINE. “I love a mermaid. We parted this morning, but—”

“I know. I have a spell that changes you from the waist down, but it’s irreversible.”

“I don’t care.”

“It turns your eyes gold.”

“I don’t *care*. I hesitated to ask you because—”

“I know.”

They walked into the sea. She whispered magic. Williams’ legs became a strong tail.

He said, “You *don’t* hate lovers?”

“You can’t always believe what you hear.” He swam away, eyes glinting, to search for his love. He found her twenty years later, splashing in a Venetian canal, watching the passersby. He lunged forward in great strokes, losing sight of her as a gondola slid between them. Its curtains opened. The witch smiled as William’s love, eyes golden, rose from the water on two good legs.

Sandrine said, “*Sometimes* you can believe what you hear.” 🍁



Bulk Food

Laurie Channer
& Peter Watts

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

ANNA MARIE HAMILTON, ANIMAL RIGHTS MICRO-star, bastes in the media spotlight just outside the aquarium gates. Her followers hang on every movement, their placards rising and falling like cardboard whitecaps to the rhythm of their chant: *two, four, six, eight, Transients are what we hate—*

One whale-hugger, bedecked in a sandwich board reading *Eat the Transients*, shouts over the din at a nearby reporter: “Naw, it’s not about the *homeless*—it’s a *whale* thing, man...”

The reporter isn’t really listening. Anna Marie has just opened her mouth. The chanting dies instantly. It’s always interesting to hear what Anna Marie Hamilton says. It changes so often, these days. Back before the Breakthrough, she was actually trying to *free* the whales. She was going around calling them *prisoners*, and *hostages*, for Christ’s sake.

"*Save the whales...*" she begins.

The reporter grunts, disappointed. *That again...*

Over at the turnstiles, Doug Largha swipes his debit card and passes through. The protesters register vaguely on his radar. Back in his student days, he considered joining, but only with the hope of scoring with some of those touchy-feely whale chicks. The things he did, back then, to get laid.

Hell. The things he does *now...*

A FOGHORN CALLS ACROSS THE STRAIT. VISIBILITY'S LOW ON BOTH sides of the world; the murk is gray above the waterline, green below. The sea around Race Rocks is empty. This place used to be a wildlife sanctuary. Now it's a DMZ.

Two hundred meters out from the islands, perimeter sensors listen patiently for intruders. There are none. The day's too cold for tourists, too foggy for spies, too damn wet for most terrestrial mammals. Nobody tries to cross over the line. Even *under* the line, traffic is way down from the old days. An occasional trio of black-and-white teardrops, each the size of a school bus. Every now and then a knife-edged dorsal fin, tall as a man. Nothing else.

There was a lot more happening out here a few years ago. Race Rocks used to be crawling with seals, sea lions, Dall's porpoises. It was a regular Who's Who back then: *Eschrichtius*, *Phocoena*, *Zalophus*, *Eumetopias*.

All that meat has long since been cleaned out. Just one species comes through here these days: *Orcinus*. Nobody asks *these* visitors for ID. They've got their own way of doing things.

Five kilometers east, the commercial trawler *Dipnet* wallows forward at half throttle. Vague gray shapes crowd restlessly along the gunwales, slick, wet, hooded against the soupy atmosphere. Even a fog that drains all color from the world can't dampen the enthusiasm on board. Snatches of song drift across the waves, male and female voices in chorus.

"*And they'll know we are sisters by our love, by our love...*"

Twenty-five meters down, a string of clicks ratchets through the water column. It sounds like the drumming of impatient fingers.

DOUG'S GOT EVERYTHING FIGURED. HE'S FOUND THE PERFECT position; right next to the rim, where the gangway extends over the tank like a big fiberglass tongue. Other spectators, with less foresight

or less motivation, fill the bleachers ringing the main tank. Plexi splashguards separate them from a million gallons of filtered seawater and the predatory behemoth within. On the far side of the tank, more fiberglass and a few tons of molded cement impersonate a rocky coastline. Every few moments a smooth black back rolls across the surface, its dorsal fin stiff as a horny penis. No floppy-fin syndrome *here*, no siree. This isn't the old days.

The show is due to start momentarily. Doug uses the time to go over the plan once more. Twenty seconds from tongue to gallery. Another thirty-five to the gift shop. Fifty-five seconds total, if he doesn't run into anyone. Perhaps sixty if he does. He'll beat them all. Doug Largha is a man on a mission.

A fanfare from the poolside speakers. A perky blonde emerges through a sudden hole in the coastal facade, wearing the traditional garb of the order: white shorts and a ducky blue staff shirt. An odd-looking piece of electronics hangs off her belt. A headset mike arcs across one cheek. The crowd cheers.

Behind the blonde, some Japanese guy hovers in the wings with an equally-Japanese kid of about twelve. The woman waves them on deck as she greets the audience.

"Good afternoon!" she chirps resoundingly over the speakers. "Welcome to the aquarium, and welcome to today's whale show!"

More applause.

"Our special guest today is Tetsuo Yamamoto, and his father, Herschel." The woman raises one arm over the water. "And our *other* special guest is, of course, *Shamu!*"

Doug snorts. They're *always* called Shamu. The Aquarium doesn't put much thought into naming killer whales these days.

"My name is Ramona, and I'll be your naturalist today." She waits for applause. There isn't much, but she acknowledges it like a standing ovation and goes into patter. "Now of course, we've been able to understand Orca ever since The Breakthrough, but we still can't *speak* it—at least, not without some very expensive hardware to help us with the higher frequencies. Fortunately our state-of-the-art translation software, developed right here at the Aquarium, lets our species talk to each other. I'll be asking Shamu to do some behaviors especially so Tetsuo here can interact with him."

Figures the kid would be center stage. Probably some Japanese rite of passage. Number One Son looks like a typical clumsy thumb-fingered preadolescent. This could be the day.

"As you may have learned from our award-winning educational displays," Ramona continues brightly, "our coast is home to two different orca societies, *Residents* and *Transients*. Both societies are ruled by the oldest females—the Matriarchs—but beyond that they have don't have much in common. In fact, they actively hate each other."

A rhythmic stomping begins from somewhere in the crowd. Ramona cranks up the smile and the volume, and forges ahead. *Research and Education*: that's the aquarium's motto, and they're sticking to it. You don't get to the good stuff until you've *learned* something.

"Now we've known since the nineteen-seventies that Transients hunt seals, dolphins, even other whales, while the Residents feed only on fish. We didn't know why until after The Breakthrough, though. It turns out that Residents are the killer whale version of animal-rights activists!" This is obviously supposed to be a joke. Nobody's laughed at that line since Doug started casing this place over a year ago, but the song remains the same.

Unfazed, Ramona continues: "Yes, the Residents consider it *un-ethical* to eat other mammals. Transients, on the other hand, believe that their gods have given them the right to eat anything in the ocean. Each group regards the other as immoral, and Residents and Transients have not been on speaking terms for hundreds of years. Of course, we at the Aquarium haven't taken sides. *Most* humans know better than to interfere in the religious affairs of others."

Ramona pauses. A faint chant of assembled voices drifts into the silence from beyond the outer wall:

"Hey *ho*—hey *ho*—the *Matriarchs* have *got to go*—"

Ramona smiles. "And despite what some people might think," she continues, "there's no such thing as a vegetarian orca."

NOT YET, ANYWAY.

Dipnet chugs steadily west. Her cargo of ambassadors scans the waves for any sign of the natives, their faith too strong to falter before anything so inconsequential as zero visibility. Not everyone gets to commune with an alien intelligence. A superior intelligence, in many ways.

Not in *every* way, of course. Many on the *Dipnet* long for the good old days of moral absolutes, the days when *Meat Was Murder* only when Humans ate it. Everything was so clear back then, to anyone

who wasn't a puppet of the Industrial-Protein Complex. There was a ready answer to anything the Ignorantsia might ask:

How come it's okay for sharks to kill baby seals? Because sharks aren't moral agents. They can't see the ethical implications of their actions.

How come it's not okay for people to kill baby seals? Because we can.

Now orcas are moral agents too. They talk. They think. They reason. Not that that's any surprise to *Dipnet's* passengers, of course—they knew the truth way back when all those bozo scientists were insisting that orcas were basically chimps with fins. But sometimes, too much insight can lead to the wrong kind of questions, questions that distract one from the truth. Questions like:

How come it's okay for orcas to kill baby seals, but we can't?

If only those idiot scientists hadn't barged in and *proved* everything. Now there's no choice but to get the orcas to give up meat.

The Residents have the greatest moral potential. At least they draw the line at fish. The Transients remain relentlessly bull-headed in their mammalvory, but perhaps the Residents can be brought to full enlightenment. Back on shore, one of the west coast's best-known Kirlian nutritionists is working tirelessly on alternate ways to meet *Orcinus'* dietary requirements. She's already had some spectacular successes with her own cats. Not only is a vegan diet vastly more efficient than conventional pet foods—the cats eat only a fraction of what they used to—but the felines have so much more energy now that they're always out on the prowl. You hardly ever see them at home any more.

Not everything goes so well, of course. There've been setbacks. In hindsight, it may have been premature to dump that thousand heads of Romaine lettuce onto A4-Pod last summer during their spring migration. Not only did the Residents fail to convert to Veganism, but apparently they'd actually been considering certain exceptions to their eat-no-mammals policy. Fortunately, everyone on the boat had made it back okay.

But that's in the past. Live and learn. Today, it is enough to stand in solidarity with the Residents against the mammalphagous Transient foe, to add Human voices in peaceful protest for a just cause. The moral education can come later. Now it is time to make friends.

The men and women of the *Dipnet* have the utmost faith in their abilities in this regard. They're ready, they're willing, they're the best of the best.

What else could they be? Every last one of them was hand-picked

by Anna-Marie Hamilton.

SHAMU SAILS PAST DOUG IN MID-AIR, HIS IVORY BELLY A GOOD two meters above water level. Their eyes meet. For all this talk about killer whale intelligence, it still looks like a big dumb fish to Doug.

It belly-flops. A small tsunami climbs the splashguards. A few scattered voices go *oooooh*.

"Now, Shamu is a Transient, so of course he'd *never* normally eat fish," Ramona announces. This is not entirely true. Back before the Breakthrough, fish was all captive Transients *ever* got. A decent meal plan was one of the first things they negotiated when the language barrier fell. "So to feed him what he *really* wants, he knows he has to *hide* for a bit."

Ramona touches a control on her belt and speaks into the mike. What's coming out of the speakers now isn't English. It sounds more like fingernails on a blackboard.

Shamu spits back a series of clicks and sinks below the surface. Waves surge back and forth across the tank, playing themselves out against the walls. Doug, standing on tiptoes, can just barely make out the black-and-white shape lurking near the bottom of the tank like a squad car at a radar trap.

Peripheral movement. Doug glances up as a great chocolate-colored shape lumbers out onto the deck. It's twice the size of the man who herds it onstage with a little help from an electric cattle prod.

"Some of you may recognize this big bruiser." Ramona's switched back to English. "Yes, this is a *Steller sea lion*. When he was just a pup, scientists from the North Pacific Fishing Consortium—one of the aquarium's proudest sponsors—rescued him and some of his friends from the wild. They were part of a research project that was intended to promote the conservation of sea lions in the North Pacific."

The sea lion darts its head back and forth, snorting like a horse. Its wet, brown eyes blink stupidly.

"And not a moment too soon. As you may know from our ever-popular Pinniped habitat, Stellers were declared extinct in the wild just five years ago. This is now one of the only places in the world where you can still see these magnificent creatures, and we take our responsibility to our charges very seriously. We go to great lengths to ensure that everything about their environment is as natural as possible.

"Including..."

Ramona pauses for effect.

“...predators.”

A ragged cheer rises up from the bleachers. Spooked, the sea lion bobs its head like a fat furry metronome. The animal wheels around the way it came, but the guy with the prod is blocking its way.

“Please try not to make any loud noises or sudden moves,” Ramona smiles belatedly.

With a few final nudges from the cattle prod, the sea lion slides into the water. It dives immediately, finally curious about its big new home.

Apparently it discovers all it wants to in about half a second, after which it shoots from the center of the pool like a Polaris missile. It doesn't quite achieve escape velocity and hits the water running, lunging for the edge as fast as its flippers can churn.

Shamu rises up like Shiva. One effortless chomp and the Steller explodes like a big wet *piñata*. A curtain of blood drenches the plexi barriers. Streamers of intestine fly through the air like shiny pink firehoses.

The audience goes wild. This is the kind of award-winning educational display they can relate to.

Shamu surges back and forth, mopping up leftover sea lion. It takes less than a minute. By the time he's finished, Ramona has the harpoon set up on the gangway.

TWO KILOMETERS OUT, ONE OF THE CHOSEN HEARS A BLOW AND alerts the others. The pilgrims again fall expectantly silent, undaunted by the fact that the first three times turned out to be the first mate blowing his nose.

To be honest, nobody here has ever heard a real orca blow, not first-hand. No *civilized* human being would ever patronize a whalejail, and whale-watching tours have been banned for years—they *said* it was a harassment issue, but everyone knows it was just Bob Finch and his aquarium industry cronies out to eliminate the competition.

The passengers huddle quietly in the fog, straining to hear above *Dipnet's* diesel cough.

Whoosh.

“There! I knew it!” And sure enough, something rolls across a fog-free patch of surface a few meters to port. “There! See?”

Whoosh. Whoosh.

Two more to starboard. Leviathan has come to greet them; her

very breath seems to dispel the fog. A pale patch of tissue-paper sun lightens the sky.

There is much rejoicing. One or two people close their eyes, choosing to commune with the orcas telepathically; no truly enlightened soul would resort to crass, earth-raping *technology* to make contact. Several others bring out dog-eared editions of Bigg's *Guide to the Genealogy and Natural History of Killer Whales*. Anna Marie has told them they'll be meeting L1, a southern Resident pod. Hungry eyes alternately scan the pages and the rolling black flanks for telltale nicks and markings.

"Look, is that L55? See that pointy bit on the saddle patch?"

"No, it's L2. Of course it's L2."

One of the telepaths speaks up. "You shouldn't call them by their Human names. They might find it offensive."

Chastened silence fall over the acolytes. After a moment, someone clears her throat. "Er, what *should* we call them then?"

The telepath looks about quickly. "Um, this one," she points to the fin nearest the boat, "tells me she's called, um, Sister Stargazer."

The others ooh in unison. Their hands fly to the crystals nestled beneath their rain ponchos.

"Six-foot dorsal," mutters the first mate. "Male."

No one notices. "Oh, look at that *big* one! I think that's the *Matriarch*!"

"Are you sure this is even L-Pod?" someone else asks uncertainly. "There aren't very many of them—isn't L1 supposed to be a *big* pod? And I thought I saw ... that is, wasn't that big one P-28?"

That stops everyone cold. "P-28 is Transient," says a fortyish woman with periwinkle shells braided into her long, graying hair. "L1 is a *Resident* pod." The accusation is clear. Is this man calling Anna Marie Hamilton a *liar*?

The heretic falters in the stony silence. "Well, that's what the Guide says." He holds the document out like a protective amulet.

"Give me that." Periwinkle snatches the book away, riffles through the pages. "This is the *old* edition." She waves the copyright page. "This was printed back in the nineteen-*eighties*, for Goddess' sake! You're supposed to have the *new* edition, the one Anna Marie approved. This is *definitely* L1." Periwinkle throws the discredited volume over the side. "Bob Finch had a hand in all those old guides until '02. You can't trust anything from before then."

The wheelhouse hatch swings open. *Dipnet's* captain, a gangly old

salt whose ears look as though they've been attached upside-down, clears his throat. "Got a message coming in," he announces over the growl of the engine. "I'll put it on the speakers." The hatch swings shut.

A message! Of course, *Dipnet* has all the technology, the hydrophones, the computers, everything it needs for the unenlightened to communicate with both species. There's a speaker mounted on the roof of the cabin, pointing down at the rear deck. It burps static for a moment, then:

"Sisters. Hurry." A squeal of feedback. "Grandmother. Says. Hello."

Count on crass western technology to turn a beautiful alien tongue into pidgin English.

"Ooh," says someone at the gunwales. "Look." The orcas are pacing *Dipnet* on either side, rolling and breathing in perfect synch.

"They want us to follow them," Periwinkle says excitedly.

"Yes, they do," intones one of the telepaths. "I can *feel* it."

The orcas are so close to the boat they're almost touching the hull. *Dipnet* plows straight ahead. Just as well. The whales aren't leaving enough room for course changes anyway.

THE CHAIR ON THE GANGWAY IS OBVIOUSLY NOT MEANT FOR children. Ramona fusses with the straps, cranks the cross-hairs down to child-height. She offers patient instruction in the use of the harpoon. Papa-san hollers up instructions of his own in Japanese. Conflicting ones, apparently; Tetsuo, bouncing excitedly in the harness, gives nothing but grief. Herschel continues his cheerful instigation: *Hey, lady, we pay ten grand for this, we do it our way thank you so much.* He doesn't seem to have noticed that Ramona's smile shows more teeth than usual.

This looks very promising. Doug glances back over his shoulder; the route's still clear. *Fifty-five seconds...*

Shamu rolls past on the other side of the plexi.

The crowd laughs. Doug turns back to center stage. Ramona's had enough; she's jumped down from Tetsuo's perch and is barking at Herschel in Japanese. Or maybe in sea lion. Herschel backs away, hands held up placatingly against Ramona's advance. It's entertaining enough, but Doug keeps his eyes on Tetsuo. The kid is the key. Adult squabbles don't interest a ten-year-old, he's strapped in at the controls of the best bloody video game since the parents' groups

came down on Nintendo. If it's going to happen at all, Doug knows, it's going to happen—

Tetsuo squeezes the trigger.

—*Now.*

Ramona turns just in time to see the harpoon strike home. The crowd cheers. Tetsuo shrieks in delight. Shamu just shrieks, thrashing. A pink cloud puffs from his blowhole.

Doug is already half-turned, one foot raised to motor. He checks himself: *Wait for it, it still might be clean...*

“*Shit!* You were supposed to *wait!*” Ramona’s mike is off-line but it doesn’t matter; you could hear that yell all the way over in the Arctic Exhibit. She brings her translator online, barks syllables. The ring-side speakers chirp and whistle. Shamu whistles back, spasming as though electrocuted. His flukes churn the water into pink froth.

“His lung’s punctured,” Ramona calls over to the guy with the cattle prod. Prodmeister disappears backstage. Ramona wheels on Tetsuo. “You were supposed to wait until I told him to hold still! Do you *want* him to suffer? It’ll take *days* to die from a hit like that!”

That’s it. Go.

He knows what’s coming. Herschel, out his ten thousand dollars, will demand that his son get another chance. The Aquarium will stand firm; ten grand buys one shot, not one kill. No, sir, you can’t try again unless you’re willing to pay.

Herschel’s own shrieks will go ultrasonic. Prodmeister will come back with another harpoon, a bigger, no-nonsense harpoon this time. Perhaps the Guests will try and wrestle it away. *That’s* resulted in an unfortunate accident or two.

Doesn’t matter. Doug’s not going to be around for any of it, he’s already halfway out of the amphitheater. From the corner of his eye he can see his competition, caught flat-footed, just starting to rise from the bleachers. Some of them, closer to the main theater entrance, would still have a chance to beat him if he was going the usual route. He’s not. Doug Largha may be the first person in recorded history to have actually *read* the award-winning educational displays in the underwater gallery, and that gives him all the edge he needs. That’s where he’s headed now, at top speed.

Herschel and his ten grand. Tetsuo and his lousy aim. Doug could kiss them both. When a guest makes a kill, they get to keep the carcass.

But when they fuck up, it’s whale steaks in the gift shop.



WELL, NO ONE EXPECTED THE WHALES TO BE SUCH ASSHOLES.

Certainly not Anna Marie Hamilton and her army of whale-huggers. The Gospel according to Anna Marie said that orcas (you *never* called them “killer whales”) were gentle, intelligent creatures who lived in harmonious matriarchal societies. Humans were ethically bound to respect their cultural autonomy. Kidnapping these creatures from the wild, tearing them from their nurturing female-centered family units and selling them into bondage for barbaric human entertainment—this went beyond mere animal abuse. This was slavery, pure and simple.

That was all before the Breakthrough, of course. These days, it’s kind of hard to rail against the enslavement of orcas when every schoolkid knows that all orca society, Resident or Transient, is *based* on slavery. Always has been. The matriarchs aren’t kindly nurturing feminist grandmas, they’re eight-ton black-and-white Mommie Dearests with really big teeth. And their children aren’t treasured guardians of the next generation, either. They’re genetic commodities, a common currency for trade between pods, and who knew what uses they got put to? It’s a scientific fact that almost half of all killer whales die before reaching their first birthday.

That infant-mortality stat has been a godsend to the aquarium industry ever since it was derived in the nineteen-seventies—*Well of course it’s tragic that another calf died here in our habitat but you know, even in the wild killer whales just aren’t very good parents*—but even the whalejailers were taken aback to be proven so utterly right. It didn’t take them long to recover from the shock, though. To embrace the irrefutable evidence of this kindred intelligence. To see the error of their ways. To reach out across that immense interspecies gulf with a business proposition.

And what do you know. The Matriarchs were more than happy to cut a deal.

“SLAVERS OF THE SEVEN SEAS,” A WALL-SIZED VIEWSCREEN SHOUTS in capital letters. Beside it, smaller screens run looped footage already seen a million times in every living room on the continent: priests and politicians and longliners and whale-huggers, riding the *Friendship Flotilla* out into history to sign the first formal agreement with the Matriarch of J-Pod.

On the other side of the gallery, past two-inch plexi, the pinkness

in the water is already starting to fade.

Doug skids to a halt in front of an orca family tree, no less boring for its catchy backlit-pastel-on-black color scheme. He scans the headings.

There. Between G27 and G33. Evidently, municipal building codes require an emergency exit here. For some reason the aquarium has incorporated it into the Orca Family Tree, right there in plain sight as the law requires, but subtle, unobtrusive. In fact, damn near invisible to anyone who hasn't actually read the genealogies line-by-line.

This is Doug's secret passage. He's done his homework; the blueprints are on file at City Hall, accessible to anyone who cares to look. On the other side of this invisible door, backstage corridors run off in three separate directions, each servicing a different gallery. All of them, eventually, end up outside. One of them opens into the gift shop.

Doug pushes at a spot on the wall. It swings open. Behind him, a muffled *boom* filters through from the main tank, followed by an inhuman squeal. Doug dives through the doorway without looking back.

Turn right. Run. Backstage, the gallery displays are ugly constructions of fiberglass and PVC. Every object gurgles or hums. Salt crusts everything. Doug's foot slips in a puddle. He starts to go over, grabs at the nearest handhold. A rack of hip waders topples in his stead. Left. Run. A row of filter pumps tears by on one side, a bank of holding tanks on the other. A dozen species of quarantined fish eye his transit with glassy indifference.

He rounds a corner. An unexpected barrier catches his shin. Doug sprawls across a stack of loose plywood. Splinters bury themselves in the balls of his hands.

"*Fuck!*" He scrambles to his feet, ignoring the pain. There are worse things than pain. There's the wrath of Alice if he comes home empty-handed.

Right there: a wood-paneled door. Not one of the crappy green metal doors that are good enough for the fishfeeders and janitors, but a nice oak job with a brass handle. That's got to be the entrance into the gift shop. He's almost there, and it's even *opening* for him, it's opening from the *other side* and he dives straight through, right into the waiting bosom of the woman coming from the other direction.

He thinks she looks familiar in the split second before they both go over. Doug catches a glimpse of someone else as a dozen vectors of force and inertia converge incompatibly on his ankle. There's a moment of brief, bright pain—

“Owwwww!!!!”

—before he hits the floor. The good news is, he lands on a carpet with a very deep pile. The bad news is, rug burn tears most of the remaining skin off his palms.

He lies there, taking collect calls from every sensory nerve in his body. Two people are looking down at him. He forgets all about the pain when he recognizes who they are.

Saint Anna. And the Devil Himself.

DIPNET HAS ARRIVED.

The perimeter is all around them: a float-line demarcated by warning buoys, a limited-entry circle a kilometer across. Scientists are only sometimes permitted here. Tourists are forbidden. But the gate swings open for *Dipnet*.

Now she chugs towards the center of the Communion Zone. The fog has partially lifted—the perimeter gate fades astern, while a tiny white dot resolves in the distance ahead. *Dipnet's* escort remains close on either side. They've said nothing since that one brief message in the Strait, although the telepaths say the orcas are brimming with goodwill and harmony.

The floating dock is close enough to see clearly now, anchored in the center of the Zone, a white disk about twenty meters across. It seems featureless, beyond a few cleats for tying up. This is the way the orcas like things. This is *their* place, and they don't want it cluttered with nonessentials. A place to land, a space to stand, and Race Rocks looming out of the fog in the middle distance. Beyond that, only orcas and ocean.

“Is there a bathroom?” someone asks. The captain of the *Dipnet* shakes his head, more in resignation than answer. He pulls back on the throttle while the mate, waiting on the foredeck with a coil of nylon rope, jumps onto the platform and reels *Dipnet* in to dock.

“This is it, folks,” the captain announces. “Everybody off.”

The engine is still idling. “Aren't you going to tie up?” Periwinkle asks.

The captain shakes his head. “You're the ambassadors. We're just the taxi. They don't want us in the zone while you *commune*.”

Periwinkle smiles patiently. She hears the resentment in the captain's voice, but she understands. It must be hard, seeing the Chosen Few going to make history while he just drives the boat. She feels sorry for him. She resolves to chant with him when he comes back to pick them up.

The captain grunts and waves her away. He sniffs and wonders, not for the first time, if this woman remembered to clean the snails out of those shells before incorporating them into her own personal fashion statement. Or maybe it's one of those *natural* fragrances they're advertising these days.

The passengers file onto the platform. The first mate, still holding *Dipnet's* leash, leaps back onto the foredeck. The boat growls backwards, changes gear, and wallows off into the haze. The sound of her engine fades with distance.

Eventually all is quiet again. The Chosen look about eagerly, not wanting to speak in this holy place. The orcas that guided them here have disappeared. Swells lap against the floats. The Race Rocks Lighthouse complains about the fog.

"Hey, you guys." It's the heretic again. He's watching the boat recede "When exactly are they supposed to be coming back for us?"

The others don't answer. This is a quiet moment, a *sacred* moment. It's no time to chatter about logistics. This guy doesn't know the first thing about reverence. Really, sometimes they wonder how he ever made the cut.

ONE WHOLE PLEXIGLAS WALL LOOKS INTO THE TURQUOISE ARENA of the killer whale tank; a pair of tail flukes disappear up through the surface in ratcheting increments. The opposite wall serves as little more than a frame for the biggest flatscreen monitor Doug has ever seen. Murky green water swirls across that display. Wriggling wavelight reflects off a glass coffee table in the middle of the room. An antique oak desk looms behind it like a small wooden mesa.

In the middle of it all, Doug looks up from the floor at Anna Marie Hamilton and Bob Finch, executive director of the Aquarium. Anna Marie Hamilton and Bob Finch look back. This goes on for a moment or two.

"Can I help you, sir?" Finch asks at last.

"I—I think I got lost," Doug says, experimentally putting his foot down on the floor. It hurts, but it feels limpable, not broken.

"The viewing gallery is *that* way," Anna Marie announces, point-

ing to a different door than the one through which Doug arrived. "And I'm in the middle of some very tough negotiating, fighting for the freedom of our spiritual sib—"

"Actually, Ann—Ms. Hamilton, I suspect that Mr.—Mr. ..."

"Largha," Doug says weakly.

"I suspect that Mr. Largha isn't all that interested in the boring details of our, er, negotiations." Finch extends a hand, helps Doug up off the carpet. Doug stands unsteadily.

"I was looking for—the *gift shop!*" His mission! Precious seconds, precious *minutes* irretrievably lost while all those other dorks and bozos line up to lay claim for *his* meat! If he doesn't come home with the steaks, he'll be sleeping on the sofa for a week. Doug turns and lunges towards the door he came through. He forgets all about his ankle for the half-second it takes for him to try and run on it. By the end of that same second he's on the floor again. "My steaks—" he whimpers. "I was going to be at the *head of the line*... I had it *planned to the second*..."

"Well, I must say," Finch extends a helping hand again, "it's heartening to see someone so enthusiastic about the Aquarium's new programs. Not everyone is, you know. Let me see what I can do."

Anna Marie Hamilton stands with her arms folded, sighing impatiently. "*Mister* Finch," she says, "if you think I'm going to let this *distract* me from the liberation of—"

"Not now, Ms. Hamilton. This will only take a moment. And then I promise, we can get right back to your tough and uncompromising negotiations." Finch takes a step towards the door, turns back to Doug. "Say, Mr. Largha, would you like to talk to a killer whale while you're waiting? A *Matriarch*? We have a live link to Juan de Fuca." He raises an arm to the flatscreen on one wall.

"Uh, live?" Emotions squabble in Doug's cortex. The pain of failure. The hope of salvation. And now, a vague discomfort. "I don't know. I mean, they *are* okay with this, aren't they? The whole whale show thing?"

"Mr. Largha, not only are they okay with it—it was their idea. So how about it? A conversation with a real, alien intelligence?"

"I don't know," Doug stammers. "I don't know what I'd *say*—"

Anna Marie snorts.

Finch draws a remote control from his blazer. "I'm sure you'll think of something." He points the remote at the flatscreen, thumbs a control.

Nothing obvious happens.

"Back in a moment," Finch promises, and closes the door behind him.

Anna Marie turns her back. Doug wonders if maybe she's offended by someone who would be in such a rush to line up for orca steaks. Or maybe she just doesn't like people very much.

A long, mournful whistle. "Sister Predator," intones an artificial voice.

Doug turns to the flatscreen. A black-and-white shape looms up in the murky green wash of Juan de Fuca Strait. Lipless jaws open a crack; a zigzag crescent of conical teeth reflects gray in the dim light.

That whistle again. In one corner of the flatscreen, a flashing green tag: *Receiving*. "Fellow Sister Predator. Welcome."

Doug gawks.

Clicks. Two rapid-fire squeals. A moan. More clicks.

Receiving.

"I am Second Grandmother. I trust you enjoy Aquarium and its many award-winning educational displays—"

Bzzt. In the upper left-hand corner of the screen: *Line Interrupt*. Silence.

At a panel on Finch's desk, Anna Marie Hamilton takes her finger off a red button.

"Wow," Doug says. "It was really talking."

Anna Marie rolls her eyes. "Yeah, well, it's not like they're going to beat us on the SATs or anything."

A REPORTER WAYLAYS BOB FINCH IN A PUBLIC CORRIDOR ON HIS way to the gift shop. She seeks a reaction in the wake of Hamilton's demonstration. Finch considers. "We agree with the activists on one score. Orcas have their own values and their own society, and we're morally bound to respect their choices."

He smiles faintly. "Where Ms. Hamilton and I part ways, of course, is that she never bothered to find out what those values *were* before leaping to defend them."

THE DOOR OPENS. FINCH THE SAVIOR STANDS IN THE DOORWAY with a wooden box in one hand, a plastic bag in the other.

Doug, rising with his hopes off the couch, forgets all about the Patriarch and his ankle. "Are those my steaks?"

Finch smiles. "Mr. Largha, it takes several days to prepare the mer-

chandise. Each sample has to be measured, weighed, and studied in accordance to our mandate of conservation through research."

"Oh, right." Doug nods. "I knew that."

"The gift shop is only taking a list of names."

"Right. "

"And unfortunately, all of today's specimen has already been spoken for. The line-up stretches all the way back into the Amazon gallery, in fact, so I brought a couple of items which I thought might do instead," Finch says. He holds up the bag. "There was quite a run on these, I was lucky to get one."

Doug squints at the label. "L'il Ahab Miniature Harpoon Kit. Rubber Tipped. Ages six and up."

"Everyone wants to prove that they're better shots than our guests." Finch chuckles. "I suspect a lot of family dogs may be discomfited tonight. I thought your children might enjoy—"

"I don't have kids," Doug says. "But I have a dog." He takes the package. "What else?"

Finch holds out the wooden box. "I was able to locate some nice harbor seal—"

Finch the False Prophet. Finch the Betrayer.

"Harbor seal? *Harbor seal!* Your gift shop is *lousy* with harbor seal! It was marked *down!* My in-laws are coming over this weekend and you want me to feed them *harbor seal?* Why don't I just give them baloney sandwiches! My *dog* won't eat harbor seal!"

Finch shakes his head. He seems more saddened than offended. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Largha. I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do for you."

Doug wobbles dangerously on his good leg. "I was injured! In *your* aquarium! I'll sue!"

"If you *were* injured, Mr. Largha, you were injured en route from somewhere that you weren't legally supposed to be in the first place. Now, please..." Finch opens the door a bit wider, just in case Doug hasn't got the point.

"Not supposed to *be* in! That was a fire exit route! Which, by the way," Doug's voice is becalmed by a sudden sense of impending victory, "was *improperly signed.*"

Finch blinks. "Improperly—"

"You can barely *see* that exit sign," Doug says. "It's buried way down in one of those stupid orca family trees. If there was ever a fire, nobody would even *find* it. I mean, who stops to read *award-*

winning educational displays when their pants are on fire?"

"Mr. Largha, the viewing gallery is solid cement on one side and a million gallons of seawater on the other. The odds of a fire are so minuscule—"

"We'll see whether the fire marshal's office thinks so. We'll see whether the *News at Six Consumer Advocate* thinks so!" Doug triumphantly folds his arms.

There is a moment of silence. Finally, Finch sighs and closes the door. "I'm really going to have to put my foot down with the art department about that. I mean, aesthetics or no aesthetics..."

"I want my orca steaks," Doug says.

Finch walks to the wall behind his desk. A touch on a hidden control and a section of paneling slides away. Behind it, cigar boxes sit neatly arranged on grillwork shelves, lit by the unmistakable glow of a refrigerator lightbulb.

Finch turns around, one of the boxes open in his hands. Doug falls silent, disbelieving. It's not cigars in those boxes

"As I said, there are no orca steaks available," Finch begins. "But I *can* offer you some beluga sushi from my private stock."

Doug takes a hop forward. Another. It's almost *impossible* to get beluga. And this isn't the black-market, Saint-Lawrence beluga, the stuff that gives you mercury poisoning if you eat it more than twice a year. This is absolute primo *Hudson Bay* beluga. The only people harpooning *them* are a few captive Inuit on a natural habitat reserve out of Churchill, and even *they* only get away with it because they keep pushing the aboriginal rights angle. Nobody's figured out Belugan yet—from what Doug's heard, belugas are probably too stupid to even *have* a language—so nobody needs to cut a deal with them.

The box in Finch's hands costs about what Doug would make in a week.

"Will this be acceptable?" Bob Finch asks politely.

Doug tries to be cool. "Well, I suppose so."

He's almost sure they don't hear the squeak in his voice.

TO THE UNTRAINED EYE, IT LOOKS LIKE RAMBUNCTIOUS PLAY. IN fact, the cavorting and splashing and bellyflopping is a synchronized and complex behavior. Co-operative hunting, it's called. First reported from the Antarctic, when a pod of killer whales was seen creating a mini-tidal wave to wash a crabeater seal off an ice floe. Definite sign of intelligence, that, the first mate's been told. He

squints through his binoculars and the intermittent fog until the whales finish.

The first mate pulls open the wheelhouse hatch and climbs inside. The captain throws *Dipnet* into gear, singing:

And they'll know we are sisters by our love, by our—

The mate picks up the tune and rummages in a locker, surfaces with a bottle of Crown Royal. "Good show today." He raises the bottle in salute.

DOUG LARGHA SAFELY DEPARTED, BOB FINCH EXTRACTS A PAIR of wineglasses from the shelves beneath the coffee table. He fills them from a convenient bottle of Chardonnay while Anna Marie taps a panel beside the flatscreen. The distant gurgling of Juan de Fuca fills the room once more.

Finch presents the activist with her glass. "Any problems on your end?"

Hamilton snorts, still fiddling one-handed with the controls. "You kidding? Turnover in the movement has always been high. And *nobody* turns down a chance to commune with the whales. It's a real adventure for them." The wall monitor flickers into splitscreen mode. One side still contains Juan de Fuca, newly restricted; the other shows one of the Aquarium's backstage holding tanks. A young male orca noses along its perimeter.

Finch raises his glass: first to the matriarch on the screen—"To your delicacies." Then to the matriarch in his office: "And to ours." Finally, he turns to the image of the holding tank. The whale there looks back at him with eyes like big black marbles.

"Welcome to the Aquarium," Finch says.

A signature whistle carries through the sound system. "Name is—" says the speaker. *No English Equivalent* flashes the readout after a moment.

"That's a *fine* name," Finch remarks. "But why don't we give you a special new name? I think we'll call you—Shamu."

"Adventure," Shamu says. "Grandmother says this place adventure. Too small. I stay here long?"

Bob Finch glances at Anna Marie Hamilton.

Anna Marie Hamilton glances at Bob Finch.

"Not long, Grandson," says an alien voice from the cool distant waters of Juan de Fuca. "Not long at all." ♣

“Alphabetia”

Carrion

Catherine MacLeod

ONE CROW SORROW, TWO CROWS JOY.

What do you call a thousand?

The trees are black with them. They've been flocking since the town dump was dozed last week, probably wondering where they'll eat now. Wherever they're hauling the garbage to, I guess.

I phoned next door to ask where that is, but Emma's not answering. At our age we worry about falling, but I'm sure she's okay—I saw her taking laundry to the line not an hour ago.

There goes a crow with a rat squirming in its beak. I didn't know they hunted. There look to be more of them tonight.

It's strange Emma doesn't answer. Maybe I better check on her. 🍁

Demands

Catherine MacLeod

CRANDALL:

Check your personnel files. If my name doesn't ring a bell, my wife's had better.

Roxanne died a year ago today. You won't admit her illness was caused by the chemicals in your plant. You won't send the money you were ordered to pay for her medical expenses.

I won't return your wife until you do.

Roxie used to read palms. Your Lisa has interesting fingerprints. I can taste the ridges when I kiss them. That cross on the mount of Saturn shows the possibility of violent death in the near future.

I only want what I'm owed.

Pay Roxanne's hospital bill. Then her funeral expenses. And mine in advance, since your chemicals got me, too. When the bills are paid you can have Lisa back, but I wouldn't drag my feet.

She doesn't like me holding her hand.

Tomorrow I'm going to mail you the other one. ♣



The Fundamental Unit of Memory

Cory Doctorow

illustrated by Lar deSouza

RECOLLECTON-JUNKIE RULE NUMBER ONE:
they surprise you.

Sonya and I were going through a bad patch, our last apartment a memory and our worldly goods split between friends' places, city lockers and a shopping cart. I made the mistake of trusting her with our bag of quarters while I took a shower at the Sunnyside Baths, and when I emerged, she'd wandered away from our cart—I called it “the RV”—and fed the whole lot to a mini-juke at the vending totem on the Boardwalk. I found her with headphones buried in her ears, swaying dreamily to a mix of music from our high school prom, a distant smile on her face, and a litter of coin-wrappers around her feet.

I parked the shopping cart beside her and waited. No sense in letting the music go to waste—maybe it would calm her down for the rest of the day—and I wouldn't have taken one headphone even if she'd offered. That stuff from the old days just gave me the creeps.

Sonya danced there, and I knew what the happy, comfortable passers-by saw: a skinny, spaced-out junkie lost in reverie, a “sad comment on the collapse of Toronto’s social safety net,” a problem that would self-correct as soon as she forgot to eat for too many consecutive days.

I saw Sonya Beresford, the beautiful, charmed girl who I’d “just-friended” since the day I loaned busfare to a strange, pretty girl from school who picked me out of the crowd at the bus shelter to ask. My mind draped her dancing form in a gauze of memory, and a million stolen glances at her in motion laid themselves overtop of her. Lord, she was beautiful, even then. And as unattainable as ever.

The music and our quarters ran out, and Sonya’s feet stilled. She opened her eyes and materialised her dimples in my direction. “Hi, Jimmy,” she said. “Nice shower?”

I shook my head at her and started pushing the cart down the boardwalk, suddenly angry and jealous. Sonya’s always had someone to buffer her from her mistakes. Those days, it was me.

I walked east along the shore, not making eye-contact with any of the happy families on the lakeshore, aware that I was a guy with all his stuff in a cart stolen from the No-Frills.

I let the anger stew inside me for a good long while, trudging on the wooden slats. Finally, I looked back over my shoulder to see if Sonya was following. She wasn’t. She was crouching down in front of a little Chinese girl in a gauzy sun-suit, smiling and holding her hand out. The girl’s parents, grilling burgers over a barbeque a few steps away, hadn’t noticed yet. I spun the cart around and pushed it back, quick-time.

By the time I reached her, the alarmed parents had caught the girl by one hand and were trying to drag her away. Sonya, oblivious, cooed at the girl, who pulled away from her parents.

I grabbed Sonya by the elbow and tugged her to her feet and a few steps down the boardwalk. She jerked free, angrily.

“Jesus, Jimmy, what’s your problem?”

“Come on, Sonya, we got to go get some more quarters before bedtime.” I tried to keep my irritation out of my voice, but I didn’t do so well.

“I want to stay on the beach! God, why are you so anal?”

“I’ll relax when we have enough quarters.”

She opened the catch on the poisoner’s ring she kept her stash in and pulled out two hits of bad street-Recollecton, chewable vitamin

C soaked in bathtub memory and clumsily stamped with the trademark R. She knew I hated it when she dosed in front of me. She smirked, then tilted her head back and dropped the Recollecton into her mouth. Her throat worked as she dry-swallowed them. Over her shoulder, the girl's parents stared at her, horrified. The little girl, who'd started crying as soon as I pulled Sonya away from her, stopped and watched her dose, fascinated. I wanted to stick my fingers down Sonya's throat.

I REMEMBER WHEN I HAD A BANK ACCOUNT, AND I COULD GET A roll of quarters by dropping a ten-dollar coin at a teller's counter. I remember when I could use my debit card to buy a paper and an espresso and a cleverly packaged Continental breakfast from the vending machines outside of Bloor Station before boarding the subway and riding to work. I remember when I could afford the richie vending machines that take cards and ten-dollar coins, instead of having to fight all day for yet more quarters.

I remember when I didn't live in a shopping cart and sleep in a coin-op coffin that wakes me up to ask for 20 more quarters.

Ah, memories.

The first variety store we tried was staffed by an old white guy, which is a bad sign. Something about the immigrant experience seems to arouse sympathy for vagrants, but elderly white guys working in convenience stores are the least empathic people I ever met. Still, it was getting late and I had to try.

I threw my greasy, ratty winter parka on top of the cart as a deterrent to thieves, and led Sonya in by the hand. I grabbed a gummy skiprope and slapped a ten down on the counter. "Can I get change in quarters, please?"

The old guy's eyes locked on a spot over my shoulder. He rang in the dollar for the penny-candy, and handed me back my change: a five and two twos. "Uh, can I get *quarters*, please?" I said, pushing the five back at him.

He ignored me, and Sonya fidgeted beside me, fondling the candy-bars. When she looked like she was going to open one, I took it away and put it back in the rack. She gave me a look and tried to pull her hand out of mine. I held fast to it and rapped the five-dollar coin on the counter. "I need quarters, sir."

The old guy finally looked at me. I felt like a bug. He opened his cash-drawer and pawed through it desultorily. "Don't got enough

quarters for the weekend.”

Sonya stopped squirming and did one of her too-fast-to-follow mood swings, draping over my shoulder and nuzzling my neck, giggling. She used to do that even before she started eating memory. As always, it gave me half an erection and made me blush to my ears. As always, she played oblivious.

“Can’t you give me even a dollar’s worth?” I said, and hated myself for the whine in my voice. I tried to divert that hate to Sonya and the fancy that prompted her to blow all our change.

The old guy’s face got cagey. “You spend another dollar, I’ll give you four quarters.”

I tried to think of what we needed, but Sonya decided for me by grabbing a pair of wax lips from the impulse-rack and stuffing them into her face. The old guy rang in another dollar and gave me back four quarters. I stuffed all the change into my front pocket and dragged Sonya back out. She was peaking on Recollecton by then, and I knew from experience that she wouldn’t notice a thing until morning. I felt guiltily pleased that she wouldn’t be any more trouble that night.

It only took three more variety stores before I found a moon-faced Korean clerk who was willing to part with three rolls of quarters. It would have to do. It took far too long to get up to Cabbagetown and the coffins.

The night was hot and muggy as only a summer night in Toronto can be, when it feels like you could drink the air. There weren’t enough quarters to run the AC, though, so we just had to suffer.

I got the stuff from the RV unloaded into the coffin first, then Kryptonite-locked the cart to a guard-rail for the night. Sonya’s hand in mine was soaked with sweat, and in the blue glow from the coffin’s fluorescents, I saw the sweat coursing freely down her face. I unhooked my water-bottle from my belt and forced her to drink, and then had the battle with my conscience that I have every time I get her to undress.

“Sonya, honey,” I said. “Get in and undress. It’s too hot to sleep in clothes.”

I had to repeat it three times before she complied, moving with a languid, unselfconscious grace that she’d had even before she moved to the past. She climbed in and I fought with myself again and lost again and found myself watching as she stripped, found my breath quickening and my ears burning and I forced myself to turn away.

I pulled off my boots and climbed in after her, then stripped myself, taking great pains not to touch her.

I settled my head on a pillow made from my rolled pants and made Sonya a pillow of her own from my parka, then flipped the lights out. The coffin slipped into an LED-punctuated gloom, where constellations of lit coin-slots and keypads glowed.

I lay there, watching them, and Sonya threw an arm and a leg over me and I lay there for much longer before I closed my eyes and remembered who she had been.

SONYA WOKE UP SOBER AND BITCHY. THE FIRST I KNEW OF IT WAS when she leapt away from me, and glared accusingly at me, even though I'd pointedly locked my hands over my head while I slept and had clearly been the cuddle-ee, not -er.

"Good morning," I said, and screwed the lid off my water bottle and shot some back before offering it to her.

She drank greedily and I tried very hard not to watch the spills slide down her throat and over her collarbones and between her breasts, and lower.

She dressed and then slumped against the wall. Her eyes closed and a slow smile spread over her face as her Recollecton hangover kicked in, which is often better than the trip itself.

I pulled on my underwear and watched her face go through its motions.

The slow play of expressions was different every time, as her brain screened home-movies from her past on the backs of her eyelids. Right now, she had a big, ice-cream-cone smile on her face, a hint of gum showing at top and bottom. She chuckled, and shifted a little, then grew pensive. Her tongue snaked out and touched the corner of her mouth, lingered a moment, then retreated. Suddenly, her whole face lit up with pure delight. It was one of her most charming expressions, one that she used generously. I'd evoked it myself, back in some dim day when she was lucid enough to listen to me spinning lengthy stories and jokes.

The lights flickered, and a scrolling LED marquee marched along one wall: DEPOSIT FOUR DOLLARS FOR THE NEXT SIXTY MINUTES. Time to go.

SONYA NEEDED TO SCORE. IT WASN'T ANYTHING I WANTED ANY part of and the one thing she did entirely on her own and without

fail. She never needed someone to catch her fall when she was doing something she wanted to do.

As usual, she was extra-nice to me that morning. She charmed a subway collector out of two rolls of quarters, then bought expensive Japanese square-apples from a machine whose LEDs only spoke Kanji. She cut and arranged them in their plastic clamshells and bought a squirt of raspberry jelly from a breakfast machine for each.

Once she was satisfied with their appearance, she untied the long gauzy scarf from around her neck and spread it out like a tablecloth on top of the RV, and served it up with a broad smile.

“Breakfast,” she said, sunnily. I ate.

“You know,” she said, as I was sipping my OJ (never coffee when she was sober; she thought caffeine kills), “I’ve been thinking. You’ve been doing all the shopping for us lately. I should take a turn.”

I didn’t say anything. I remembered the time that she and I had rented a car and filled the backseat with tapes and sodas and driven north on side-roads all night, a self-guided tour of all the weird shit people display on their lawns in the country: papier-maché reindeer, Looney Tunes windmills, concrete garden gnomes. We pulled over and just sat and talked about my then-girlfriend and her then-boyfriend, and our parents, and books, and music, and we slept in the car until the sun got so hot it woke us up, and I drove home. When I dropped her off, she leaned in and gave me a hard kiss on the cheek and squeezed my hand.

Sonya wiped up the last of the raspberry jelly with her fingertip and licked it off. “So,” she continued, “why don’t you give me some money and I’ll meet you by the swing-set at Christie Pitts this afternoon? I’ll get some dinner things, and we can cook on one of the barbeques. What do you want for dinner?”

“Whatever,” I said, finally, and dumped four tens into her hand. They disappeared into her purse and she gave me a hug and leaned into my ear and said, “Thanks, Jimmy! See you around six, ’kay?” She skipped off.

SONYA’S MOM AND I USED TO GET ALONG. THERE WERE TIMES when I got on better with her than Sonya. That all ended when I started taking care of Sonya. It wasn’t the taking care part that pissed her mom off; it was the fact that I was paying for her dope.

I see her point. Even so, if I didn’t pay for it, Sonya would have found the money, and who knows how she’d do that? I mean, I didn’t

think she was far enough gone to start turning tricks or anything. Still. I remember one time I was waiting for her outside of a clothing store in the Eaton Centre, and she grabbed me by the arm as she walked quickly past me and then broke into a run as a security guard behind her shouted for her to stop. We ran breathlessly through the mall and out onto Queen Street and when we found a doorway to rest in, she pulled an ugly bra from her purse, the tag still attached to it.

I fed two quarters to a payphone and dialed Sonya's mom at the art gallery where she worked.

"Yes," she answered.

"It's Jimmy."

She didn't say anything.

"We're doing okay. I just wanted to let you know that."

"Where is she?"

"Shopping," I lied.

"You gave her money." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

She let the silence stretch. "Well, anyways, I just wanted to let you know, we're doing okay. I'm going to try to get some work. We might get a place again on the first of the month."

Silence.

"Well, goodbye."

"She's okay?" Sonya's mom said.

"She's okay."

She drew a long, shuddering breath that sounded like a sob. "I want to have you two over for dinner," she said.

"I don't think she wants to do that," I said.

"She'll do it, if you ask her to."

I didn't think it was true, but it made me feel sort of good to know that she thought so. "I'll ask her."

"Where are you two staying?"

"We have a room."

"Where?" she asked, though she knew the answer.

"In Cabbagetown," I said.

"A coffin."

"Keeps the rain off our heads," I said, trying for a moment of lightness. Sonya's mom had always been impressed with how smart I was, how witty.

"Maybe you can stay the night?"

"I'll ask her," I said again.

The phone made a pipping noise and the LED asked for more money. "I have to go," I said.

"Take care of her, okay?" she said.

"I am," I said, and let the receiver drop. It hung limp on its tether, swinging. I went off to find work.

I FOUND A LOCKER AND EMPTIED THE RV INTO IT, EXCEPT FOR A small knapsack with my good clothes in it. I locked the RV up at the Bloor Station bike rack and then paid another quarter for a toilet kiosk where I changed. I washed my face and brushed my teeth and shaved as best I could, then walked to KwykTemps.

Sara was working the front desk, and she gave me a nice smile, the way she always did. I like Sara: she's young and pretty and she likes my jokes, and she's always straight with me when she sends me out on gigs. She's the only one at KwykTemps I told when I got evicted. They're only supposed to place people with addresses and phones, but Sara just leaves me voicemail and never lets on to her boss.

"Look what the cat drug in," she said.

"Anything today?" I tried to sound eager, not desperate.

"Not much," she said. I tried to keep the disappointment off my face. "Only this," she said, and handed me some hardcopy, then waited while I read it.

It was a good gig, photo retouching for a downtown PR agency that was producing a huge catalogue. Two weeks, good money, nine to five. A plum. I made a mental note to buy Sara a big bunch of flowers with the first paycheque.

"You got to be there in half an hour. Got cabfare?"

I smiled sheepishly and mumbled something about walking quickly. Sara threw a fifty on the counter and a slip of paper. "Sign here. Petty cash voucher. My supervisor's on vacation for a week, so I'm abusing her authority. Merry Christmas."

I signed and scooped the money and opened my mouth to thank her, but couldn't find the words.

"Go," she said, making a scoot motion. "Half an hour. You're meeting with someone named Andrew. I'll call and let them know you're on the way."

Andrew turned out to be a trendoid jerk who wore a Japanese baseball uniform and offered me a teensy cup of some expensive

brain tonic when I came through the door. I spent the day in a closet-sized office that I recognized from other gigs as a standard-issue temp-hell. The next eight hours flew past, as I moused through screen after screen of magnified images, cleaning up close-crops. Andrew signed my chit as I left, and offered me a hit of Recollecton from an antique wooden pencilbox.

"I trekked for two years in Southeast Asia," he explained. "A couple tabs of this, and I'm right there. I got a prescription from my doctor for my 'nervous tummy.' Go ahead, take one."

I nearly knocked the box out of his hand, but instead I pocketed one, telling myself that this was one less hit Sonya would have to buy with my paycheck.

I GOT TENSE AS I APPROACHED CHRISTIE PITTS, ONCE AGAIN WEARING my regular clothes, pushing the RV. It was coming on seven o'clock when Sonya drifted dreamily down the ravine. I was perched on a bench next to the swing-set, watching a Triple-A ballgame at one of the diamonds. Sonya sailed through the sandbox and sat next to me on the bench. A richie boy, maybe eighteen, followed her. Both of them were obviously stoned. They sat on the bench next to me.

"Hi, Jimmy," Sonya said. "This is Kai."

"Hey, man," Kai said. He was pretty, the way Sonya liked them, with long, thick hair and an aquiline nose that he seemed to stare down. His clothes were expensive ripoffs of home-made street-rags, and he chewed an unlit pipe. I hated him instantly, and began obsessing over what his angry parents would do when they found him with us. I shook his hand, anyway.

"So," I said, casually, "what's for dinner?"

Sonya unwound a plastic shopping bag from her wrist and produced two oranges. They had soft spots, and I knew she'd dug them out of some fruit market's curbside trash.

"Yum," I said, unenthusiastically. "Any change?"

Sonya ignored me. "My shoulder hurts," she said. She turned her back to Kai. He took the hint and started rubbing her shoulders. She let her head loll and smiled.

I took a deep breath and didn't shout. I took another deep breath. "I got some work for the next couple weeks."

"Uh huh," Sonya said, absently.

"It might be enough to get a place again."

"That'd be good," Sonya said. Kai's busy hands had slipped to her

tailbone, and the top of her ass.

"Hey, Kai?" I said.

"Yeah, man," he said.

"Why don't you give us a minute alone here, okay?"

"Sure," he said. He walked over to the playground and started pumping on a swing.

"Your mom wants to have us for dinner," I said.

"Good. I'm hungry," Sonya said.

Recollecton junkies are always full of surprises.

"We can't take him," I said, gesturing at Kai, who was pumping himself even higher on the swings, his hair streaming out behind him.

"Sure, whatever."

"And you can't act stoned."

"Who's acting?" she said, and closed her eyes and smiled. She started singing, a Tom Waits song we used to sing all the time, her doing a high, uncertain harmony, me rasping along. I forgot my enervation for a moment, listening to her thin voice skipping over the high notes. I joined in—it had been so long since we sang together—and she smiled that special delighted smile at me and put her arm around my shoulder and touched her head to mine, and we finished the song like two cartoon drunks.

"You sing good, Jimmy," she said to me, and gave me a sisterly peck on the cheek.

"You too, kid."

"I don't have any change from the oranges. I spent it," she said.

"That's okay. You really want to go over to your mom's?"

"Tonight?"

"If you want."

"I'd like that."

"So say goodbye to your friend, and we'll go."

She walked to the swing and Kai jumped off. She said something to him, and gave him a hug, and he grabbed her and pressed his mouth to hers, and I saw him force his tongue in. I started to get up, but Sonya laughed around his tongue, laughed and laughed, and he let go of her, and she rolled in the gravel, laughing. I laughed too, and poor Kai trudged away from us, alone and stoned, up the ravine. "Bye, man," I called after him.

I helped Sonya up and she gave me a hug that went on and on, and right then, I would have done anything for her.

I DON'T KNOW WHY I DIDN'T CALL SONYA'S MOM TO LET HER KNOW that we were coming; maybe I was worried that if I gave Sonya a chance to think about it that she'd change her mind; maybe I was just enjoying Sonya's company too much to think about anyone else.

I was feeling flush and so I sprung for a pair of subway tokens at Christie station. We got off at Royal York and pushed the cart through the little artsy neighbourhood like two kids on a lark, barefoot on the cooling pavement.

We rang the bell at her mom's place and waited. And waited. I rang it again.

More time passed and that's when I started thinking that I should have called first. Then we heard the sound of the chain being moved and the deadbolts being shot, and Sonya's mom opened the door. She was wearing a bathrobe, and her hair was tangled and loose and grey. Her perfect makeup was missing, revealing a crumple of crowsfeet and wrinkles. She looked so *old*, I nearly didn't recognize her.

Her lips were thin and pressed together, and Sonya brushed past her, heading towards the kitchen as though she were just coming home from school. I got behind the cart and tipped its front wheels up and started pushing it through the door. Sonya's mom stepped aside. She folded her arms across her chest and looked at me, and for a second, I saw Sonya in the angry, unreasonable set of her jaw.

"Well, Jimmy, what a surprise," she said.

"Hi. I guess I should have called," I said.

"Whatever. I'm glad you came. Just give me a minute to change and I'll get some dinner together."

"Can I help?"

The ghost of a smile passed over her face. "You've always been helpful, Jimmy. Why don't you just let me take care of it?"

Sonya was already into the fridge, drinking straight out of the juice carton, shoveling slices of cheese into her mouth. It made me feel guilty, like I wasn't getting enough food into her.

"Let's go watch some TV," I said, tugging on her elbow, closing the fridge behind her.

The last time I'd been there, the TV had had a tapestry hung over its screen and a coating of dust on top of it. Now it sat in the middle of the livingroom, and the sofa cushions were disarrayed. A down comforter was on the floor beside it

We ate in strained silence. Sonya shoved food into her mouth and guzzled red wine. Sonya's mom barely ate at all, instead, just watched Sonya with her lips pressed together. A couple of times, she started to reach out to touch Sonya, then stopped.

We had a tossed salad and a big bowl of spaghetti with bottled gourmet pesto and crusty white rolls that Sonya's mom thawed in the microwave. Sonya's mom made coffee and defrosted tiramisu afterwards, and sipped nervously at her coffee while Sonya stared at her disapprovingly.

"That stuff's awful for you, Mom," she said, virtually her first words of the evening.

"I'm old enough to decide what's bad for me and what isn't," Sonya's mom snapped back.

"It's why you're aging prematurely. You'd be so much healthier if—"

"That's enough. I'm not aging prematurely. I'm 58 years old, and I have a daughter I haven't seen in eight months, and I look old. How can you *presume* to lecture me on health?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Sonya. If this had been any other time, it would have made me happy to see her so engaged, so *there*. But watching her and her mom bicker was like watching trucks playing chicken. I had an urge to duck under the table.

"You *know* what that means. I don't have to sit in my own house and listen to a lecture on health from a *drug addict*. God! Look at you! You're so skinny I can count your ribs from here."

"Just because I'm not lugging around three sets of love handles—"

I stood up and asked if I could get Sonya's mom a refill, and cleared some plates. I went into the kitchen and fed the dishes to the dishwasher. By the time I got back, an uneasy truce had been arrived at. "Jimmy, would you like to spend the night? I can make up the sofa for you, and Sonya can have her old room."

"Thank you," I said, thinking of how much easier it would be to get to work tomorrow. "That would be very nice. But only if you're sure we're not putting you out."

"Not at all," she said, frostily.

I TOSSED AND TURNED ON THE SOFA, DISORIENTED BY THE ABSENCE of Sonya at my side. Finally, I switched on the TV, turned it to some trashy movie on the Jesus Network with all the good bits cut out and twenty-minute beg-a-thons instead of commercials. I turned the

volume down and watched until I fell asleep.

I woke to Sonya's mom screaming. I ran up the stairs two at a time and burst into Sonya's room. For a second, I was so shocked that I stopped dead: it was a shrine to Sonya, every poster still hung, the familiar books still on the bookcases. All of it just the same, except clean in a way it never was when Sonya and I sat up here with smuggled beers after school, singing and talking or just lying side-by-side on the bed and reading.

Sonya's mom was kneeling on the bed, shaking Sonya, rocking her back and forth, calling her name.

"What," I said. "What is it?"

"I can't wake her up," she said.

A flutter of panic passed through my tripe, the old worry that someone had sold her rat-poison instead of memory, and I pushed her mom rudely away. "Sonya," I said, in my most commanding voice, peeling back her eyelid. I put my ear to her lips, then her chest. She was breathing and her heart was pumping lazily. I slapped her on the cheek, called her name again. I did it again and again, for five minutes, until Sonya cracked one eye and slid a sly grin at me. "Hey, Jimmy-boy," she said.

Behind me, Sonya's mom started to cry.

The poisoner's ring on Sonya's finger hung open, and all the dope she'd bought the day before was gone, swallowed greedy while Sonya lay in her old bed, in the shrine that her mother had built to her junkie daughter.

"She's just stoned," I said.

Sonya's mom slapped me, hard, across the cheek. I felt my cheeks burn hot and didn't say or do anything.

"She'll be fine by suppertime," I said at last. "I have to go to work, now."

Sonya rolled onto her side, and blindly cuddled her much-chewed stuffed dog. I could have kicked her.

I SPENT THE MORNING FRETTING IN THE CLOSET, PRETENDING TO work, mousing and clicking just enough to satisfy the workflow monitor, but not accomplishing much of much. When the lunch chime came up on my screen, I found a payphone and called Sonya's mom's, hoping that Sonya would be straight enough to get the phone.

"Sonya?" Sonya's mom said, when she picked up.

"No, it's Jimmy."

She sucked air. "Where is she?"

"She isn't there?"

Sonya's mom sobbed. "I hoped she was with you. We had a fight and she left."

"What? How long ago?" She hadn't looked like she was in any shape to go anywhere just a few hours before.

"Just after the doctor left—"

"What doctor?"

"I was worried. I called a doctor. He gave her a shot, to get her up. We had a fight about her going in for treatment, and she left. She took my purse."

"Shit," I said. I looked around the phone, pointlessly scanning the crowd for Sonya. "How much was in it?"

"A few hundred," she said.

"Shit," I said again.

"What?"

"That's a lot of Recollecton," I thought aloud.

"Oh God," she said, and cried harder. "I'm calling the police."

"Don't do that, okay? I'll check my voicemail, look around the places where she's normally at. Just don't call the cops. It's the last thing we need."

SONYA HADN'T LEFT ME ANY VOICEMAIL. SHE WASN'T ON THE beach, or at Christie Pitts, or at the coffins, or hanging around outside of Metro Reference Library.

I stopped off at the locker and switched into my boots—my work shoes were pinching me—and jumped a cab out to the Danforth, where the Recollecton dealers swilled pitchers of beer on the patios of Greek restaurants all day and all night. I walked all around, up the side streets and alleys, looking under the climbers in the schoolyards.

I finally found her twined around Kai, under a tree in a tiny parkette littered with dogshit. Her bra was on the ground beside her, and she snuggled against him, sleeping with one hand down the front of his pants. I swallowed a knob of revulsion.

I grabbed her free hand and pulled her roughly to her feet. Kai flopped over and pawed at the ground where she'd been, then cracked one eye. "Hey, man," he said when he saw me.

I turned away before I did anything that I would regret and

dragged Sonya away. Once I had her back on the Danforth, I patted down my pockets, but they were empty. It was a long, long walk back to Royal York. Sonya's mom's purse was slung over her shoulder, a big, jumbled bag. I rifled it, painfully conscious of what we must look like, and found her wallet. All the cash was gone, but there were several photos of Sonya: as an infant, as a little girl, as a beautiful 16-year-old, at our graduation, another at some wedding. I stuffed them in my pocket and started dragging and carrying Sonya the long way back to her mom's place.

"I'M AFRAID I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE TELLING YOU WHERE SHE is," Sonya's mom said, after she got back in the morning. I'd spent it fitfully pacing the livingroom, unable to concentrate on the TV, unable to eat or drink or even think.

She'd nearly collapsed with relief when I brought Sonya home. I was sore all over and drenched in sweat. Sonya's mom had taken her away in a cab without so much as a word of thanks.

"What do you mean?" I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. "I've been taking care of her for *months!*"

Sonya's mom fixed me with a look of hatred so intense I started back. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave now, Jimmy. Here's twenty dollars for your trouble yesterday."

Stunned, I let her drop the coins into my palm. "I'm not going until you tell me where she is," I said.

"Didn't you hear me? I said, get out of my house. I'll just call the police if you don't. Don't make me do that."

"Jesus!" I said. She picked up the phone. "I'm going, I'm going," I said, and pushed the RV out the door.

I GOT TO THE OFFICE TWO HOURS LATE. I HASTILY LOCKED UP THE RV and cleaned up in a toilet kiosk, and rushed past the receptionist towards Andrew's desk.

He wasn't there. I heaved a sigh of relief. He was late, too. Something was going my way, anyways.

I walked more slowly to the desk I'd been using. A scrubbed, pretty young richie girl was sitting there. She looked up when I cleared my throat. "Are you Jimmy?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, ignoring the sinking feeling inside my stomach.

"Sara at KwykTemps has been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday. Call her, all right?" She had a faintly superior air, and I

knew she'd been given my job.

I called Sara from a payphone out front. "Sara! It's Jimmy. Don't say anything, okay? Just let me explain—"

"There's nothing to explain," she said. "I gave you a chance and you blew it. Do you have any idea how many messages I left for you?"

"God, I'm sorry. I had to take care of a sick friend—"

"I don't want to hear it, Jimmy. You can pick up your pay for the day and a half you put in. I had to fight to get that. I'll leave it for you at the front desk."

I PICKED UP A BUNCH OF CARNATIONS FROM A MACHINE IN Rosedale station and carried them to the KwykTemps office. The receptionist handed me an envelope, but wouldn't let me past. She took the flowers and promised to deliver them later.

I wandered out into the late afternoon blast-furnace and felt the warm pavement through the worn soles of my boots. I remembered walking there with Sonya, singing arm-in-arm, laughing at the passers-by.

I walked down to Yonge and Bloor, then picked a direction at random and pushed the RV along. A few hours later, I decided that I didn't really need all that shit, packed a few items into a knapsack and abandoned the shopping cart on the roadside.

An hour after that, after the sun had set and the pavement started to cool, I sat and took a drink of water. When I got back up, the knapsack seemed too excessive a burden to haul.

I wandered through High Park, and stripped down to a pair of shorts and my undershirt, leaving everything else in the grass. Finally, standing on the edge of Grenadier Pond, I buried my hands in my pockets and started to toss my quarters and dollars into the water, admiring the dark splashes they made as they hit.

I fished through my pockets for more things to get rid of, and came up with the hit of Recollecton that Andrew the trendoid had forced on me. In the park-lights, the R was hardly readable. It looked like an Aspirin.

I put it on the tip of my tongue, tilted my head back and swallowed.

THE TASTE OF THAT FIRST HIT OF MEMORY LINGERS IN MY MOUTH as I sit up, shivering, in the unheated coffin. Through the scratched port-hole, I can see that the snow is still falling. I pull my govern-

ment-issue blanket tighter around me and try to ignore the tight hunger chewing at my gut.

Kai is vaguely watching the LEDs march around the coffin's displays. "Having fun yet, man?" he asks, when he notices me watching him.

"Just shut up and put a quarter in the heater, all right?" I say, testily. He still gets on my nerves, even after all this time. The only way I can handle him is when I'm stoned.

"Sorry, bro. All out of quarters," he says, and smiles a dreamy lazy smile. ♣

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“Alphabetia”

Equity

Catherine MacLeod

CYM WATCHED THE MERCHANT MIX THE CURE, and pressed a palm to her stomach as the baby kicked. She wondered if her husband was aware enough to feel pain. To wonder where she was. To finally hear about the child they’d hoped for and given up on.

Finding no cure for his illness, Dr. Barret sent her to the crossroad to buy it. Cym knew about crossroads—they were where you made deals with the devil.

He said, “Shall we discuss payment?”

“Please.” Money she had, but not many choices.

“I want the pound of flesh nearest your heart. Dr. Barret assures me you’re able to pay.” She flinched with sudden understanding. The merchant offered the tiny flask holding her husband’s life. “Of course, you’re not *obliged* to take it.”

The baby rolled under her hand. 🍁

Flight

Catherine MacLeod

HE MADE TIME FOR LORI, AND MONEY AND room. He made his wife whatever she wanted.

She wanted him to make her a ghost.

He slipped her out of the hospital at 2:30 a.m. They hit the highway at three. The moon and morphine put a glow in her eyes.

There was no traffic. Talking about this had scared him. He lowered the top. She started to climb. He was scared again.

He floored it. Lori hoisted herself onto the roll bar and balanced across her hip bones. The wind held her in place. He thought, "Soon." Soon...

Now.

He slammed the brakes. She shone like an angel. Screamed like a harpy.

She flew.

Later, he heard what might have been a ghost, but was likely only a bird. He stood on the side of the road a long time before going to find her. 🍁



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Last Call

Derryl Murphy

illustrated by Robert Pasternak

THE PHONE RANG. JACKIE ROLLED OVER AND peered at the clock, eyes blurry and trying to make out the numbers. 4:25.

Her eyes flew open and she reached for the phone. The baby chose the same moment to practice soccer with her bladder, and she grimaced, pressing her free hand to her belly. She found the handset and brought it up to her ear, hit the button to answer. Dreading the voice she might hear on the other end.

“Hello?”

A soft clicking, and then an impersonal voice. “Mrs. Ferris, this is the operator. Please stand by for a call.”

What the hell? More noises, and then another voice, hollow and sounding far away. So unexpected it took her a second to realize who it was.

“Jackie. Sorry about the time, love.”

With some effort she rolled over onto her back, lay there with her free hand still on her belly, feeling the baby’s motions. “Allen. My God, honey, the phone ringing so early scared the hell out of me.

You haven't come down already, have you?"

A moment's silence, and then a small chuckle. "No, love, not quite yet." A few loud breaths, and then, "How's the baby?"

She smiled, felt the motion as it rolled inside her like a dolphin trying to breach the surface. "Just fine. Must know that its daddy is calling, because there's some sort of party happening down there right now."

Her husband chuckled again. "Do me a favor, Jack? Put the phone up to your belly for a minute. I'd like to talk to the Worm for a couple of seconds."

Jackie laughed. "Jesus, Allen. NASA must owe you some big if you can get patched through from building the station just to talk to a fetus."

There was a knock on the bedroom door right then, and her mother poked her head in, a concerned look on her face. Jackie mouthed Allen's name and shrugged her shoulders, smiling so her mother would understand it wasn't an emergency. Then she pointed at the chair in the corner. Her mother sat, still looking concerned.

Something in Allen's voice changed, took on the firmness that he knew got things done for him. "Please just do it for me, Jack. Go ahead and put it on speaker so you can hear as well, if you like."

She frowned. "Sure, Allen. Mom's in the room now as well."

"Good. I'll talk to her for a moment as well."

"Oh-kay." She dragged out the word. "Glad NASA's paying the tolls on this one." She pressed the button on the handset, held the phone above her belly. "Go ahead, hon."

A few more deep breaths, now sounding somewhat hoarse over the speaker. "Worm? This is your daddy. I know you haven't heard my voice for a few weeks. That's because I've been working far away from home, helping build the new space station. Whatever you turn out to be, Worm, boy or girl, I want you to know in advance that your daddy is very proud of you. I know that whatever you choose to do, you will do it very well and with much joy." He took some more breaths. "I love you very much. Please remember that."

"Allen?" Jackie sat staring at the phone. "What the hell?"

"Just a second, love. Denise?"

"I'm here, Allen."

"You'll know what to do. I love your daughter more than life itself, you know."

Jackie's mother smiled slightly. "I never doubted it for a second,

Allen. You were always more than I could have asked for."

"Thanks." He laughed. "You too, sometimes. Take care, Denise."

Jackie switched off the speakerphone. "What the hell is happening, Allen? Are they keeping you up there for overtime? Because if they are, I'm going to phone Morris myself and let him know what I think about that. They promised you'd be down in time for the delivery."

"No overtime, love. But..." His voice caught, and except for the echoing breathing, he was silent.

"But what? Allen, honey, you're scaring me." Jackie could feel tears coming to her eyes. "Please don't do this. Just tell me what's happening. *Please.*"

"All right." She heard him sniff loudly. "Shit. Wish they knew of some way to wipe your nose inside a helmet."

"In a helmet? Why are you in your suit, Allen? Shouldn't you be talking to me from the living module or the shuttle?" She bit her lower lip and grabbed the blanket with her free hand, twirling it into a tight knot around her fingers. Her mother got up from the chair, came and sat on the side of the bed, put her hand on Jackie's knee.

"There's been an accident, love. Davey's been killed."

"Oh my God," said Jackie. "Poor Andrea. Oh God. I have to call her." She reached over to the night table and grabbed a tissue, dabbed at her eyes and then her nose.

"I was there too, Jack. With him at the time."

"Jesus, Allen! What happened? Were you hurt?"

"No trauma to the suit, if that's what you mean. But there were other problems."

"Don't do this to me, Allen! Stop fucking around and tell me what has happened to you!"

"I'm sorry, love." More breathing. "I wasn't tethered at the time, Jack. I had my MMU on, so that I could maneuver between where Davey was working and another spot on the solar array we were trying to fix. I was down beside Davey when something happened to the MMU—they figure it was hit by a loose screw that's probably been in orbit for a few decades."

Jackie closed her eyes, tried to remember what Allen had told her about his suit. Her eyes snapped open. "The MMU? The unit with the nitrogen gas you use for jetting around between sites, right?"

"Right, love."

"Then what?"

"Just before they patched me through to you, Wesley told me they figure the screw was doing something like a hundred thousand kilometers per hour. It blew right through the MMU. The releasing gas sent me spinning." There was silence for a second. "I guess it was me that knocked Davey into the path of the laser. Don't know how or why he kept his hand on the dead man's switch." His voice was quieter now, more distant.

She took a deep breath. "Where are you?"

"About seventy kilometers away from the station right now, maybe even more."

"Christ." It was a whisper. Her mother reached out and took her free hand, eyes wide and fearful. "Please tell me they're sending the shuttle to pick you up."

Allen was silent, only his gasping breaths coming through right now.

"Damn it, Allen, tell me!"

"They tried, Jack. But Mission Control stopped them before they could even close up the airlock and push away from the station. There isn't enough fuel to safely pick me up. They'd lose the shuttle and everyone on board as well."

"As well." Jackie repeated the words. A sob welled up from deep inside her, escaped before she could cut it off.

"I'm sorry, love. I wasn't sure where this conversation was going to go once it came out, and there were some things I wanted to make sure I did. For your benefit as well as for the baby." More distant breaths. "Shit. Only so much time and so much to say, I don't want it screwed up by crying the whole time, making so much noise we can't hear each other."

Jackie closed her eyes for a moment, fought to regain control. She was an astronaut's wife, damn it! Part of her had always been prepared for this.

She tried to speak but her voice choked inside her throat. She coughed, then said, "I'm all right now."

"Good. I knew you could handle this. Wesley didn't think this call was a good idea, but thankfully they called Morris. He cleared it right away. Man knows what's important."

A thought came to Jackie, of her husband floating through space forever, lifeless body wrapped inside his tomb of a suit. She bit her lip. "What's the view right now?" she asked. She knew her husband could rave for hours about all that he saw when he was in orbit.

"Great." Allen laughed. "A little unsettling, to tell you the truth. But still great. Just wish it was constant."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm spinning crazier than a top, love. It's worse than the first time I jumped from a plane, when I forgot to arch my back. Earth-space-Earth-space-Earth-space, on and on. At least I had a chute to straighten me out back then."

She smiled. "I remember that jump. I was so pissed off with you when you came home with that sprained ankle."

A small laugh. "Only time in my life I've regretted being served my meals in bed."

The doorbell rang. Denise got up to offer a hand, but Jackie shook her head vigorously, waving her towards the front door instead. "There's someone at the door, Allen." She pressed the heel of her free hand to her left eye, smeared at the tears that were starting to flow there, repeated the procedure on her other eye.

"Should be Morris and Sandra, Jack. He told me they were going to be heading right over. Just make sure you check before opening the door, confirm that it isn't media. They shouldn't know about this yet, but you can never be too sure."

Denise headed downstairs, Jackie following slowly behind her. At the foot of the stairs she paused, watched as her mother let the former astronaut and his wife into the front entry. "It's them, Allen," she whispered. "But I'm not sure I want company right now."

"Your mom will know what to do, love, don't worry. Just go settle into your comfy chair."

Sandra came over and gave Jackie a quick hard hug, looked her in the eyes with her own agonized expression, then turned and followed Denise into the kitchen. Already Jackie could smell the coffee brewing. She turned and went into the den, eased herself into the comfy chair.

"You know where the key for the safe deposit box is?" said Allen.

Jackie held her breath a moment, willing herself to be strong for him. "On the rack by the back door."

"Yeah. There's a video for Worm in the box, something I made a few days before launch. My will and a note for you as well."

He waited for her to answer, breathing still sounding louder and more ragged than his voice. When she didn't talk, he continued.

"Insurance and the pension should cover things nicely, and I suspect you can expect a decent payout from NASA. Spend something

on yourself, put a bunch away in a fund for Worm for education. I'll trust you to know what's right to do with it."

Jackie held the phone away for a second, blew her nose. "Damn right you'll trust me, hon. I do the money stuff even when you're home."

"Ha. Right you are."

They were both silent for a few seconds. Then, "Have I told you today that I love you?"

Before she could fight it off, a sob jumped from deep inside her. She pulled the phone away from her ear, biting hard on her quivering lower lip and squeezing her eyes against the new flow of tears. No matter how hard the day, no matter the time, Allen always found time to say that to her every day they were together. Even if it slipped his mind until the literal last minute, he would wake her up at a minute to midnight if he had to, just to tell her that.

But then she found a smile, small and sad, but still a smile. "Trust you to wake me up in the middle of the night to let me know. Couldn't remember at a decent hour, could you?"

They both laughed, Jackie's laughs quickly turning into a coughing fit to cover up the rising swell of sobs.

"Remember all our special walks in the woods, okay? And dinner at Packrat's."

She smiled. "Always."

His breathing was more ragged now. "Seeing the Perseids together on our third date, and me lying in bed crying from laughing so hard when I read you things that you always managed to put up with, even when you hated them." His voice caught. "Never forget."

"Never," she whispered. She closed her eyes and imagined she could smell him right now, his sweat and odor comforting her.

"I have to go now, love."

Her eyes flew open. "Now?" Jackie heard the hint of a wail in her voice. "Why now? You phone to tell me you're about to die, and then you hang up on me before I can get my head around the news!" The tears pouring down her cheeks were ignored now.

"Jack, I'm not heading off into some obscure orbit. The MMU kicked me down, straight into the gravity well."

"Down." Her heart stopped.

"Down. Guess you'd hear it from Morris or worse, on the news. I'll be going out like a comet, love."

"You'll burn." This much she remembered.

"I won't feel it. Fat chance I'm going to wait around for my face to catch fire. Just don't tell Worm, 'kay? Let the little gaffer know that I went out in a blaze of glory, not in a blast of self-administered explosive decompression."

More sobs. "Okay. It'll ... it'll be our secret."

"Right." Breathing, sounding heavy and frightened, some background noises. "Jack?"

She caught her own breath, held it for a moment until she felt some semblance of strength return. "Have I told you today that I love you?"

Silence. Her voice caught in her throat and she was about to scream his name, but then he finally answered her. "Today and every day, love. Take good care of Worm."

There was a click, and seconds later a dial tone.

The baby started to kick again. Jackie sat on the comfy chair, legs curled to the side, one hand on her belly and the other still holding the phone, eyes closed. The sobs started when her mother came into the room and put a hand on her shoulder. ♣

In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by CORY DOCTOROW, JAMES VAN PELT, DAVID CLINK, THOMAS CLABURN, KATE RIEDEL, CATHERINE MACLEOD, E.L. CHEN, MELINDA HSU, MICHAEL VANCE, D. PETER MACLEOD, HUGH A.D. SPENCER, STEVE MOHN, MARK ANTHONY BRENNAN, MATTHEW JOHNSON, L.E. MODESITT, JR., GARY ARCHAMBAULT, SCOTT MACKAY, and many more!

About Our Contributors

About Our Authors

SHAWN BRAYMAN ("Io You") is 43 years old and began writing science fiction short stories last year—inspired by his daughters, Devan and Kira. His wife Nancy edits all of his stories, usually dozens of times each. Shawn is the president of a software company located in Lindsay, Ontario. This is his first professional fiction sale.

LESLIE BROWN ("Preserving the Species") daylights as a technician at the National Research Council in Ottawa. She is a member of the Lyngarde Writers Group. This is her third published story, all with *On Spec* ("A Valediction" Fall 1998, "Nor Iron Bars A Cage" Spring 2000).

LISA CARREIRO ("Diva") usually edits and writes nonfiction. This is her first fiction piece to be published. She says, "I am too much of a wuss for the Winnipeg winters I grew up with, so I have lived and worked in many other areas of Canada in a myriad of occupations. After several years as an editor in Toronto, I recently settled in Kingston with my partner and our cat."

SIOBHAN CARROLL (Second Prize: "A Killer of Men") is a new writer, currently attending her third year at the University of British Columbia. She has done some poetry readings at the Word on the Street festival and has some poems forthcoming in *Room of One's Own*. This is her first professional sale.

LAURIE CHANNER & PETER WATTS ("Bulk Food") LAURIE CHANNER lives with a giant squid and a number of cats in Toronto. She is currently flogging a modern-day pirate novel, which, curiously enough, is *not* about the film producers she deals with every day. PETER WATTS is Canada's only native-born full-time SF writer over 6'5" with a hideously-deformed toenail on his right foot. His first novel, *Starfish*, was NY Times Notable Book of the Year; the sequel (from Tor, 2001) contains virtually none of the elements that readers liked about the first book. Writing is only Watts' day job, until he breaks out and makes it big as a marine biologist.

CORY DOCTOROW ("The Fundamental Unit of Memory") Cory Doctorow's (www.craphound.com) short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Amazing*, *SF Age*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *On Spec*, *Tesseracts*, and both *Dozois'* and *Hartwell's Year's Best SF* anthologies. His nonfiction appears in *Wired*, *Sci Fi Entertainment*, and elsewhere. With Karl Schroeder, he wrote *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing SF* for Macmillan USA, and he is currently at work on a novel, an anthology project, a single-author collection, a travel book and an intelligent agent project. He is CIO of Steelbridge, Inc. (www.steelbridge.com).

ROBYN HERRINGTON ("Just a Passenger") was born and raised in South Australia (which explains the funny accent), but now lives and works in Calgary. Her business card says "Production Artist," something she's still chuckling about. When she's not bending words, she's blowing glass, and that (she feels) is the extent of her artistic talent. She's been married to Bruce (the Wonder Spouse) for a long time, and they like to travel. Ask them about cruising some time, but only when you have time to spare. Her home page is at: www.ucalgary.ca/~rmherrin. Robyn's a member of the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association, and is pleased to be in this volume of *On Spec* with two other "IFWits" (Hayden Trenholm and Liz Westbrook).

EDWARD HOORNAERT ("Devil, Devil") was born in Chicago and currently lives in Arizona, but in between the two spent 18 great years in various parts of B.C. A musician as well as a writer (software manuals, mostly, but also romance novels), he played oboe in the Kamloops Symphony Orchestra for a decade. "Devil, Devil" is his first published foray into his soul's favorite genre.

JAMES KEENAN ("Cowboy Bill") This is James Keenan's second story to appear in *On Spec* ("The Draft Dodger" Summer 2000). He lives, writes, and enjoys marital bliss in Ottawa.

WILMA KENNY ("The Wedding") has published poems, a gardening column for a local newspaper, and a short nonfiction piece for the CBC. "The Wedding," which draws its inspiration from French Canadian folklore, is one of her early (and recent) attempts at speculative fiction, and her first professional sale.

CATHERINE MACLEOD ("Alphabetia" postcards) has published short fiction in *TaleBones*, *TransVersions* and *On Spec* (most recently, "The Other Dead," in Summer 2000). She hasn't been fit to live with since *Psi Factor* was cancelled.

KAIN MASSIN (First Prize: "Wrong Dreaming") has twice finished in the top ten places of the Science Fiction Writers of Earth Contest, received an Honorable Mention from L Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest and been short-listed for the Aurealis Awards for Australian SF & F. He has had stories published in *Harbinger Magazine* and in *Altair* magazine. In his other life, he is a high school teacher living in Adelaide, South Australia, with his (understanding and patient) wife and teenage daughter. "Wrong Dreaming" is his first professional sale.

STEVE MOHN ("Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter" and "Seeing 2001") lives in Montreal west. He has previously contributed to *On Spec* ("Sonny Boy" Spring 2000) and to the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. "Seeing 2001" is the first in a series of essays on film and SF for *On Spec*.

DERRYLL MURPHY ("Last Call") recently took a bold step forward in his career as a science fiction writer; he moved to an alien culture. All jokes about living in Utah aside, he remains a patriotic Canadian and promises to continue to root for the Oilers, even in the midst of a vacuum of news about his beloved homeland.

CARL SIEBER ("Jack Be Nimble") says: "There's a table by my desk that I pile my published stories on and it's not a very big table yet. So I pull on my yellow gumboots, go walking down by the sea, come back, sit down, and see what I can do about getting a bigger table."

R.W.C. SYLVESTER (Third Prize "Getting Pissed With the Minotaur") is a teacher residing in Vancouver and, like the rest of you, is at work on his first novel. He doesn't normally do this kind of thing.

HAYDEN TRENHOLM ("Tempus Fugitive") Hayden Trenholm is a published novelist and professionally produced playwright. His short fiction has appeared in *On Spec* ("The healing Fountain" Fall 1997, "Paying the Piper" Summer 1999), *Tesseract's*, *TransVersions*, and CBC Radio.

LIZ WESTBROOK ("Prize") lives and writes in Calgary with her partner, Hayden Trenholm. She has published a number of short stories, both mainstream and speculative. This story will mark her third appearance in *On Spec* ("Bullbreaker" Winter 1997, "Dust to Dust" Spring 1999).

About Our Artists

JAMES BEVERIDGE (art for "Wrong Dreaming") is currently still cavorting and instigating aesthetic mayhem with his airbrush but has plans to switch to an almost fully digital quasiverse in the near future. The game he was working on has been delayed due to the staunch quality moguls in the programming department. However, it is being beta tested and can be checked out at <http://www.gilbertgoodmate.com/> Jim will be working on future projects with these game makers.

LAR DESOUSA (art for "The Fundamental Unit of Memory") was rocketed to Earth as a young babe where he grew to manhood aware of his awesome powers and responsibilities. Unfortunately, he looks terrible in spandex and chose a life of artistic endeavors instead. Cartoonist, caricaturist, illustrator and all around nice guy, he lives in Ontario with his wife, two daughters and three cats.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (art for "A Killer of Men") has been illustrating and cartooning professionally for almost 20 years. Her artwork has appeared in numerous publications across North America and she is a two-time recipient of the Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. Lynne lives in Coquitlam with her husband, the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk. You can reach her at: lynnef@graphic-designer.com.

PETER MACDOUGALL (art for Cover and "Bulk Food") works in pen and ink, water color, acrylic, digital and digital 3D media doing design and illustration. In addition, he writes speculative fiction, tinkers with computers, and even earns a living. He reports that he is native to the Canadian coast, either east or west. To see more of his artwork, visit <http://home.istar.ca/~pem/>

RONN SUTTON (art for "Getting Pissed With the Minotaur") has currently pencilled over 20 assignments of *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* for American company Claypool Comics. His work has previously appeared in comics from a dozen different publishers, as well as hundreds of illustrations for mainstream, newsstand magazines (including a front cover for *Macleans* magazine). He has also been a Key Animator on TV cartoons, commercials and animated feature films. He lives in Ottawa with Aurora Award winning writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington.

ROBERT PASTERNAK (art for "Last Call") e-mailed upon reading "Last Call": "Just read 'Last Call' ... what a powerful story! I don't know if it's the day or the weather, or what, but I started crying on the second page through to the rest of the story. I don't know if it's because my partner's name is Jacque (I call her Jack) and we have kids already, or is it that I feel I am always spinning out of orbit, and just may stay there one day... In doing the sketches for the story, I realized how similar the feeling I wanted to portray, that of an eternal embrace, was to a painting by Gustave Klimt called *The Kiss*. Then I couldn't get his image out of my head. This added to the fact that I really did not want to try and do a realistic pen and ink that I know would not have portrayed this 'feeling' I wanted. I also wanted to exercise the creation of a watercolor and have some flowing fun. The sketches and finished painting took about 4 hours." ❁

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